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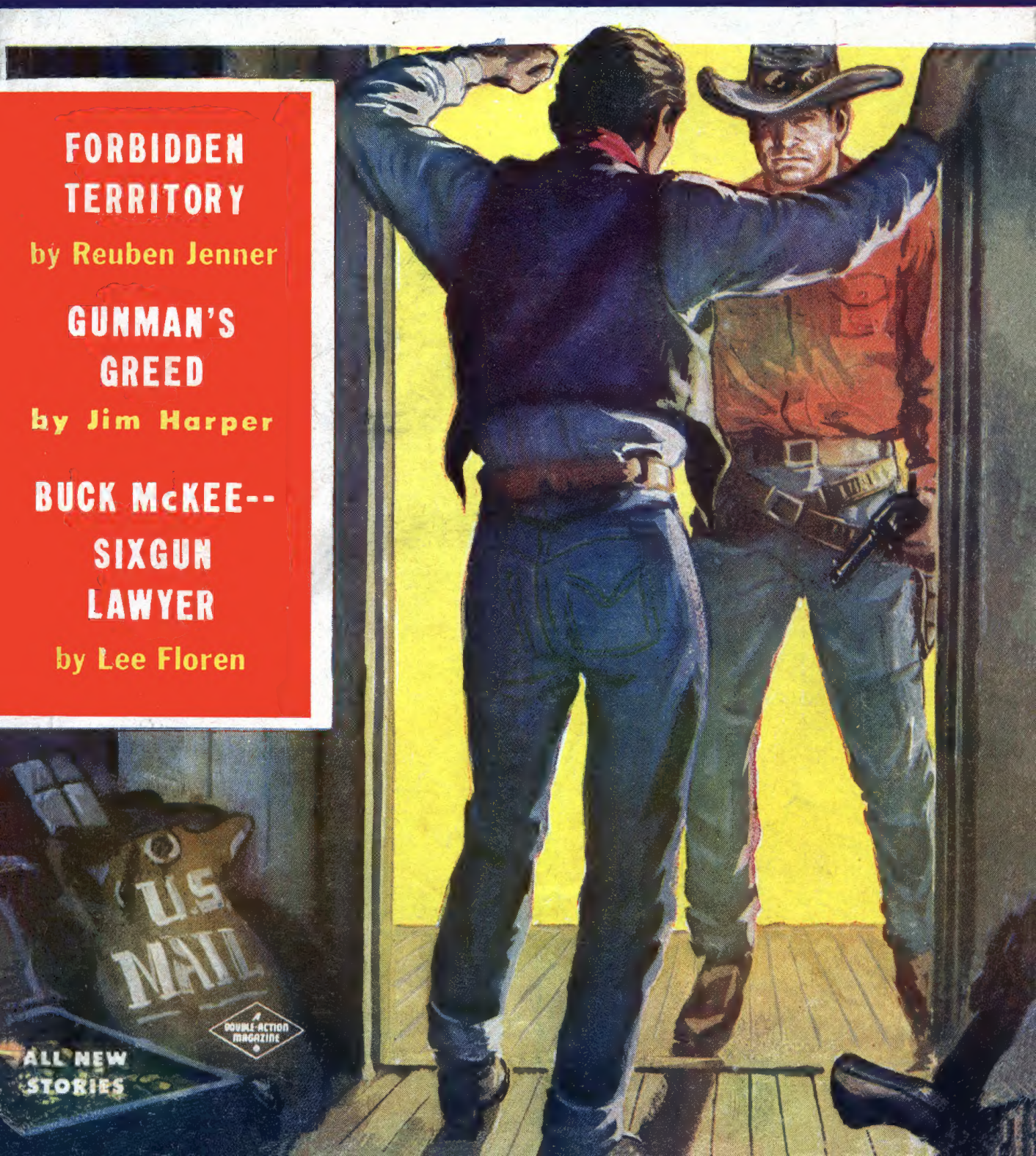

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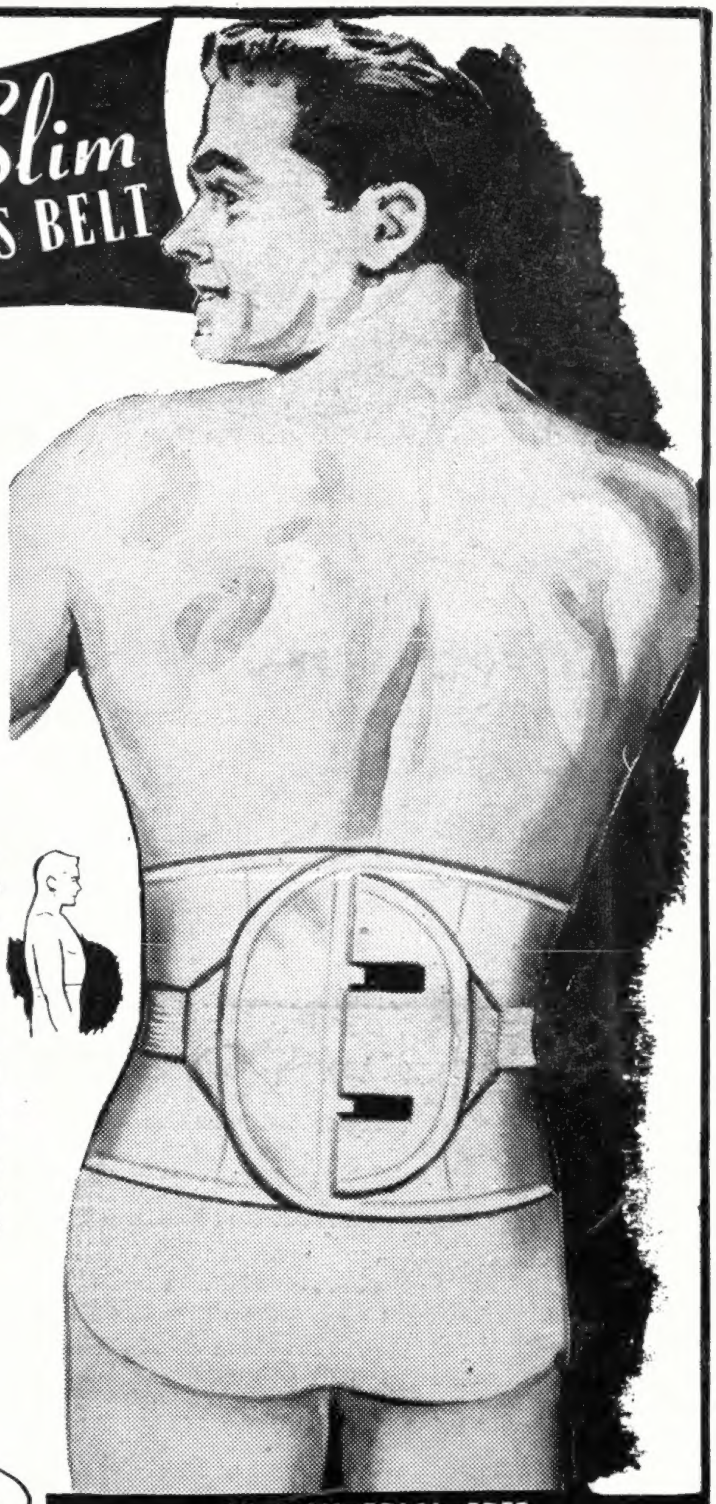

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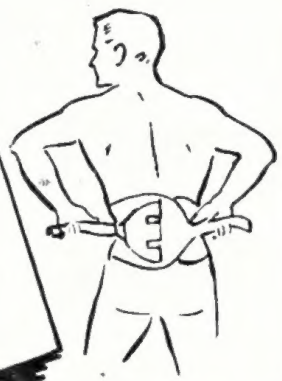

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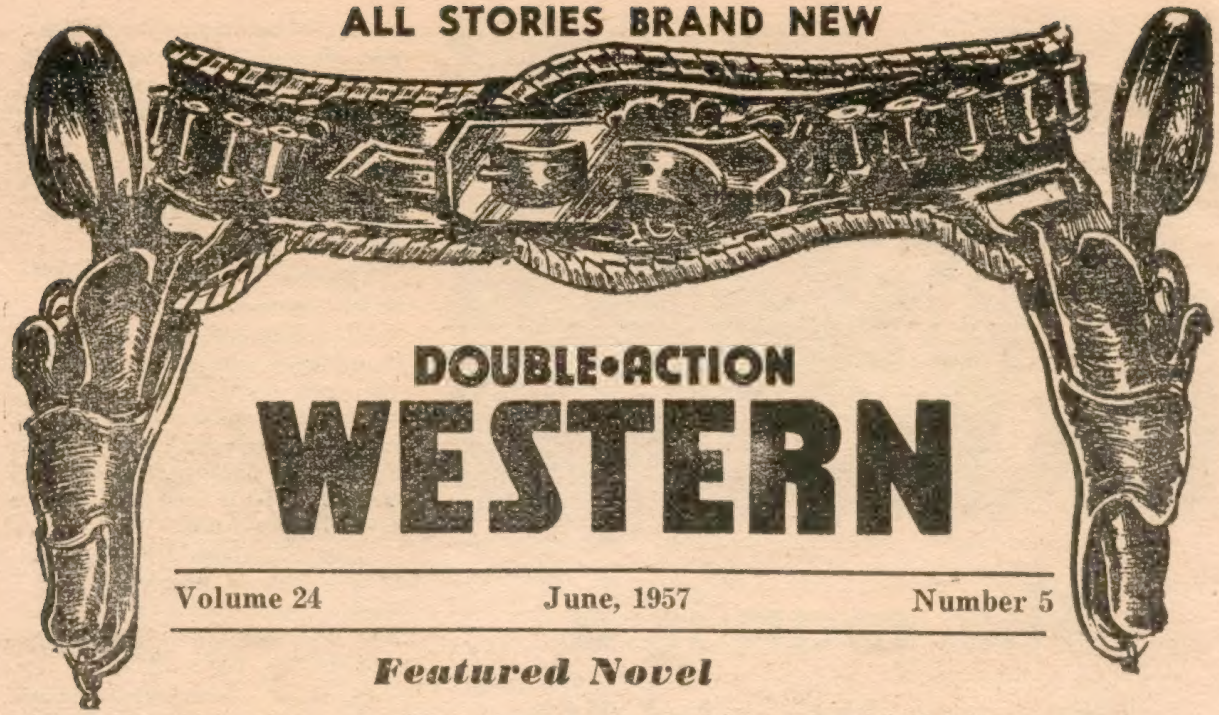

DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN

Volume 24 June, 1957 Number 5

Featured Novel

FORBIDDEN TERRITORY

by Reuben Jenner **6**

Ben Royle was the kind of gent who rebelled when he came across a deal like the one that Mason was pulling. He'd pay a small fee to get his herd across the river — but not the kind Mason was demanding. And that meant gunsmoke trouble all around!

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ROBERT A. W. LOWNDES, *Editor* MARIE ANTOINETTE PARK, *Asso. Ed.*

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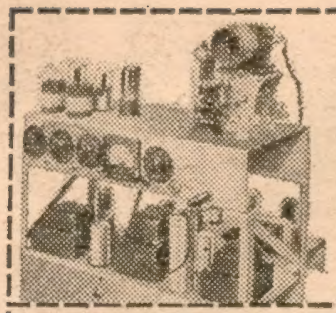

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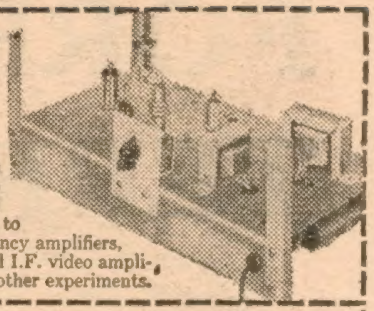

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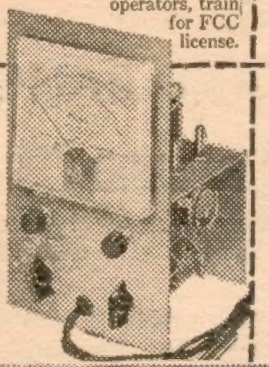

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FORBIDDEN TERRITORY

TOPHAND RANGE NOVEL

by REUBEN JENNER

Sure, you can post gunslicks at a crossing, who will inform all comers that the toll is so much per head — and you'll collect for awhile. But, sooner or later, someone is going to find a way of knocking out those guards and getting across without paying. And that is when the end begins . . .

BEN ROYLE left the Pecos Basin with little more than fifty head of cattle and a dream in the heart, and for long weeks he drove high into the Arizona badlands and north-west to the border, looking for the Valley of Grass. Back in the Pecos Basin folks figured that there was enough grass to feed all the beef in Texas, and they said that Ben sure must be touched in the head.

They just didn't understand about Ben's dream. Texas was all right if you didn't mind being bounded on all sides by neighboring ranches after you'd saved for a lifetime to buy a spread of your own. But to a young man of twenty-eight, a lifetime is a long time to wait. Ben dreamed his dream, and figured that if he pushed out beyond the settlements and claimed a hunk of that new land the Government was offering, he could start being his own master right now.

So he had saved a lot of his salary as a cowhand on Boss Morton's Lazy L, and had bought fifty of the Lazy L's best cattle-stock and pulled out of the Basin. An old saddletramp who'd wandered in many places had told Ben of the sixty-mile valley of grass hidden high among the hills along the Arizona border, and had said that there wasn't a ranch within five hundred miles of it.

It was this dream which had kept him headed doggedly northwest through many difficulties. But they were only the ordinary difficulties which have always hampered pioneers since the beginning of Time—the constant search for grazing and water, the blind trails that must be retraced, and so on—and there was nothing about them that might make an interesting story. Ben's story really began the day he met up with the Gaynor brothers.

By that time he was a worried man, his tiny herd grown lean from travel and poor grazing. He was high in the northern Arizona hills, where the country was a broken mixture of rocky ridges and parched canyons, and with

"Cline Mason's men have kidnapped the Sanderson girl!"

a cold fear settling in his heart he began to wonder whether that old wanderer had lied about the Valley of Grass. It was supposed to be even further north, but each day the country seemed worse, and it was hard to imagine that there could be any lush valleys hidden among these bare rocky peaks.

Then suddenly, one afternoon, he found his way barred by a deep canyon along the floor of which a river flowed, and knew that if he was to get any further north he had to first find a way of crossing this barrier. He had to make a choice, travelling east or west along the canyon rim to find a trail by which he could lower to the river. He chose west, and prayed that he'd chosen right.

In one way, he had. An hour's drive, with the sweet smell of water exciting the herd to livelier movement, brought him to a narrow trail which dropped steadily to the canyon floor. Unfortunately, it also led him to the Gaynor brothers.

It was a shock to find that the sparkling water of the river couldn't be reached from this side. The near bank was a ledge of rock with the river passing twelve feet below, and the cattle bellowed in baffled rage as they stamped up and down the bank with the water so close yet beyond reach. Then it was that Ben, loping his mount west along the river, came to a stoutly-built wooden bridge which was a way to the sloping dirt riverbank on the far side. And at the far side of the bridge two men appeared. They had come from a small hut nearby, and now they strolled across the bridge, nodding at Ben.

"Howdy, stranger," the taller man called. He was very thin, with a com-

bination of small black eyes and off-centre nose which gave him a sly, cunning appearance. He said, "I'm Kel Gaynor. This's my brother George. Sure is kinda good to see a new face in these parts. Come far?"

"From Texas," Ben said. He nodded northward. "Lookin' for grazin' country, but right now water is my need. Sure is good to find this river. Reckon I'll drive my stock across the bridge and let 'em drink."

"Sure." Kel Gaynor grinned. "That's what the bridge is for, stranger. Only cost yuh a dollar a head."

"Ain't no trouble about that," Ben said, tossing a silver dollar to the tall man.

"Jus' a minute, stranger," Kel Gaynow said, while his brother grinned. "I said it'll cost yuh a dollar a head."

"I heard you," Ben said. "I gave you the dollar, fella. I've got no riders, no wife, nobody else at all. There's only me."

"Yuh an' some cows," Gaynor said. "A dollar a head. How many head are you runnin', stranger?"

BEN HAD been about to ride back along the river bank, but now he reined up and stared at the brothers in astonishment. Then he laughed. "You're jokin', huh? The Gov'ment would never ask a dollar a head for cattle to cross a bridge—"

"This ain't got nothin' to do with the Gov'ment," Gaynor said. "This here bridge was built by Lou Condo, who runs a store up at the minin' town of White Ridge. Lou needed the bridge for bringin' in supplies, but it cost money to build, see, an' if folks wanta use it they've gotta pay."

"All right," Ben said, his lean face tight beneath its stubble of beard. "I'll pay a fair toll, sure. But a dollar a head is plumb ridic'lous. I've got fifty head o' stock. I sure ain't payin' you fifty dollars, Gaynor."

"Fifty dollars," the shorter brother said, speaking at last. He was younger than Kel, smooth-faced and lazy-voiced. "It ain't our idee, mister. We jus' work for Lou Condo."

Ben mopped his sweating face with a neckerchief, angry and baffled. He just had to get his stock watered, and danged soon. If these robbing polecats insisted on getting fifty dollars, he would have to give in. He couldn't see his herd die.

At last he said, "All right, dang-blast you! Fifty dollars. Make out a promise-to-pay an' I'll sign it."

"No good," Kel said, grinning. "Lou always deals in cash."

"I haven't got fifty dollars," Ben said. "And now there was a cold note of menace in his voice. He said, "I'm Ben Royle, an' back in the Pecos Basin they'd take my word for fifty dollars. I don't like havin' my word doubted. You write a bill, I'll sign it, then when I get to White Ridge I'll sell a couple of steers for beef an' pay Condo his blood-money."

"Like hell you will," Kell said. "Once across the bridge yuh'd forget the whole thing—"

"Damn you!" Ben cried, anger driving his right hand to the forty-five that was holstered at his right thigh. But before he closed his fist on the grip, George Gaynor's Colt was aimed at his head. Ben's hand froze.

It had been lightning fast, one of the quickest draws Ben had ever seen. Slowly his hand came away from his gun, and the smiling George Gaynor spun his Colt and sheathed it.

"Wise hombre," he drawled. "Now get goin', Royle, because if yuh ain't got fifty bucks we don't wanta know yuh."

Ben jogged his mount away, seething with baffled rage. All along that impossible rock bank the stock were strung out, frantic for water. There it was, twelve feet away, but it might as well have been twelve miles. The river bank was a wall that dropped sheer, and he rode eastward until

sundown without finding any change in the formation.

Slowly Ben headed his mount back toward the bridge, riding in the sun's afterglow. And now he was stifling his rage. Anger would get him nowhere, and here was a problem that required clear thinking. By the time darkness came, he'd done a lot of thinking and had formed a plan.

IT WAS a dangerous plan, but he was determined to attempt it. The reward was worth the danger, he felt. Water for his precious fifty head. To keep his dream alive he would face any danger. Now it was dark and he was maybe half a mile from the bridge, but out of sight of the Gaynors because of a bend in the canyon. There he unpacked his gear and made camp, while his cattle still waited along the river bank, bellowing restlessly.

As he smoked, the camp fire died. At the end of his third cigaret it was only a pile of embers. Then Ben slid from his bunk and hastily rolled a blanket to look like a sleeping form. Just for safety, in case one of the danged Gaynors should come snooping about.

Quietly he left his camp and went to the river. Above, the stars shone brightly from a velvet sky, their glow lighting the country with that clear blue light found only at its best in the lonely places of the earth.

The river was a rippling gurgle of silver below the lip of the rocky bank. It was maybe sixty feet wide. Ben was wearing his gunbelt with the holstered forty-five, but the cartridges had been removed from the cylinder, and all the spare slugs from the belt had also been left back there in his bunk. Wet bullets wouldn't fire anyway, and Ben's desperate plan included a wetting.

Leaving his sweat-stained hat on the bank, Ben lowered himself over the side and splashed into the water. He hadn't risked a dive into this unknown stream in the dark, but now he found that he could have. It was very deep, and flowing cleanly. He began to swim for the opposite bank.

He was a good swimmer and it wasn't far, but his waterlogged clothing and the weight of his forty-five made him glad to feel the sandy slope of the north bank underfoot. In a few moments he was out of the water and resting. The north bank sloped easily, and here his cattle could stand with fore-feet in water and drink their fill.

Or they could when he got them across.

That was the problem to which there was only one solution. The stock could only cross by the bridge. That meant that the Gaynors must first be put out of action. Now Ben Royle was making his way to the bridge to attack—from the rear.

It was a cinch that whoever guarded the bridge would be facing the south, alert for some sign of movement. The last thing they would think of was the possibility of being attacked from their own side of the river. On that hope, anyway, Ben was acting. In the glowing starlight he walked leisurely toward the bridge, water streaming from his clothes, and minutes later he saw the grey timber of the bridge shape itself in the night. Then he saw the tiny hut, or cabin, that stood a little further west beyond the bridge.

All was quiet, except for the occasional bellow of a steer on the other riverbank. For the bellows, Ben was grateful. They would tend to keep the guard's attention trained southward, Ben thought. He moved silently closer —and saw the glow of a lonely cigaret at the southern end of the bridge.

For long minutes Ben waited, listening. He knew that two men guarding the bridge together wouldn't remain silent for long. But there were no voices. He guessed that, like he'd figured earlier, they were doing watch for watch, the other asleep in the hut.

Now he moved on to the bridge and

began to cross it, hoping against creaking timber. Luck was with him, or maybe the heavy half-logs underfoot were too solid to creak. In a few moments he was close enough to see the shape of the man who held the glowing cigaret.

He sat on a box at the entrance to the bridge, a heavy rail closing the way. He seemed a small hombre, and Ben guessed that it was George, in his estimation the most dangerous of the Gaynors. Ben drew the empty forty-five from his wet holster, and at that moment the guard seemed to sense the danger behind. He swung round, rising from his box—

"My gun's out," Ben hissed. "You're fast, George, but not that fast. Soon's you touch your Colt I'll plug you."

"What the hell..." Gaynor was backed against the blocking rail now, peering at Ben and seeing the glint of starlight on the forty-five. He said, "How'd you get behind me, blast yuh?"

"Never mind," Ben said. "Jus' what I'm gonna do next is all you need know. Don't make a noise. Be nice an' sociable and we'll get along fine. Up with your hands, and turn round." The short man obeyed, slowly. Ben stepped nearer to reach for his gun—then George Gaynor's hand suddenly closed over Ben. He spoke quickly, excitedly.

"No you don't, Royle. I'm wise to you now. You swam the river. You bluffed me with a wet gun..."

HE TWISTED away savagely, his fist still gripping Ben's as Ben tried to jerk the Colt from his holster. In a split second Ben realised that his life hung in the balance and it was no time for niceties. Swiftly he raised his own empty gun, and as George clawed his other hand off the Colt he brought his cold forty-five down on George's scalp.

It was a cruel blow, but it ended all argument. Now George lay in a silent heap on the bridge. Ben acted quickly. He saw the blocking rail across the bridge, and found that it was bound into position with lengths of rope. He took a jack-knife from his pocket and slashed the ropes. He used them to securely tie the now moaning Gaynor, then threw the blocking rail aside so that the way across the bridge was clear.

Then he dragged the roped-up body of the unconscious man toward the cabin. Ten yards from it he left his burden and continued on alone. With his ear against the wall he heard the sound of snoring inside. He tried the door, found it unlocked, and glided into the darkness of the building.

The snores guided him to a bunk against the wall, and from the slight starglow that entered a window he made out Kel Gaynor's lean face against a pillow. It was a nasty awakening for the tall man, as Ben rammed George's Colt at his ribs and said, "All right, big brother, act agreeable or you'll finish cold like George."

"What the..." But the startled question died in his throat as Kel realised the position, and his next action was a shocker that caught Ben off balance. Casually the hombre brought one hand from under a blanket—and there was a blast of fire and thunder in the cabin, a hot bullet fanning Ben's face in the dark.

A second shot followed, its blast almost a continuation of the first. That one slapped flesh from Ben's right arm, and he dropped the Colt he'd taken from George. Kel kept right on blasting, his bullets probing the darkness as Ben dropped to the floor and rolled desperately.

Then the firing stopped. There was silence. There in the darkness Ben tried to think, his mind going back over the shock-filled seconds to count the echoes that still seemed to ring in

his ears. Five shots, he thought, though he couldn't be sure.

Moments later he knew that he was right. He heard Kel's bunk creak and saw vague movement. Kel was sitting up and anxiously peering at the dark floor and corners of the hut. Ben could see the shine of his gun as he swayed it about. The tall man had fired five shots, wasn't sure whether he'd scored, and was keeping the sixth for a finish-up if needed.

Ben hardly dared to breathe. He saw the shine of the gun pointing toward him, and sweated as he wondered whether Gaynor could see him. Then, in the starlight from the window, he saw Gaynor leave his bunk to begin walking slowly about the room, one bare foot probing the dark places.

That suited Ben fine. He waited, and when the searching foot came within reach he yanked it savagely. The sixth bullet smashed wood from the floor as Kel crashed, and the next moment Kel was under Ben's writhing weight and taking a beating.

The thin man struggled to roll free, but his strength couldn't match Ben Royle's. With well-placed punches about the jaw, Ben silenced his man. Then he quickly bound him with strips of blanket and, trying to ignore the pain of his bullet-creased arm, went out and dragged George into the hut to join his brother.

George was conscious now, heaving uselessly in his bonds and turning the air blue with savage language.

Ben went back to the bridge, crossed it, walked the half-mile back to his camp, and saddled up. It took some time to get the stock moving in the dark, and it was maybe two hours before they were lining the north bank of the river to drink. Ben let his horse drink, too, while he rolled a smoke and thought hard. There was something queer about this set-up, he thought. Something kind of deep, with issues far more important than the payment of toll...

- 2 -

ALL NEXT day, as he drove his tiny herd deeper into the northern hills, Ben Royle wondered about Lou Condo and the Gaynor brothers. The more he thought of it, the more certain he was that there'd been a plan to block him. That business of asking a dollar a head, in cold cash, could only have been a blind. No man in his right senses would be expected to pay such a fee.

He'd never heard of Lou Condo, didn't have an enemy in these or any other parts, as far as he knew. He'd heard of White Ridge, sure. Who hadn't? Gold had been found there, away in the hills of North Arizona. There'd been a rush for awhile, but the first finds of the precious metal hadn't fulfilled their promise, and the excitement had died.

But he knew that White Ridge still lived. Men who were content to wash for color along the creek were making a living, and there was always the chance that more nugget gold would be found some day. Many men who'd spent their savings and crossed the entire West to get there, were content to stay there until something better turned up. That was the story of White Ridge as Ben knew it, from saloon gossip and travellers' talk he'd heard back in Texas.

He didn't know the exact location of White Ridge, but from the Gaynors' remarks he guessed it wasn't far away. And Condo, the man whose bridge he'd crossed, ran a store there. Ben Royle was right anxious to meet him.

Meanwhile, the man from Texas had other worries. Grass and alfalfa along these ridges was scarce, his herd stripping it clean as they passed. As yet there was no sign of the promised Valley of Grass, and he figured that there should have been by now.

One thing was certain. If he didn't find good grazing soon his venture would fail. The stock were lean and weary, and would soon begin to die off. And added to all this was the worry that, when they got loose, the Gaynor brothers would likely trail him. That younger one, George, was a dangerous hombre, not the kind to take a beating without seeking to even it up.

That night he camped dry, in a valley between ridges, the sun's glow like molten fire in the west as it turned the world to gold. In such a light Ben scanned the distance, despair in his heart. There was no sign of the pursuing Gaynors, certainly, but at the same time a valley of lush grass in such rocky dryness seemed the limit of impossibility.

Ben slept fitfully that night, his mind restless with worry. In the dawn twilight he was up and scanning southward again, but still he saw no sign of the Gaynors. Playing safe, he breakfasted cold, figuring that if they were searching for him he wasn't keen to guide them with campfire smoke. Before sun-up he was pushing north again, his gaze hungrily searching for grass as each new ridge was topped.

He discovered nothing of interest until midday, and then it wasn't grass. It was a town, a huddle of shabby wooden buildings along a creek to the west. Ben swung toward it.

White Ridge, he thought. And he felt bound to see Lou Condo, not happy about the action he'd been forced to take and anxious to show that he'd been in the right.

Then there was the creek. At last his stock would be able to drink. And that thought led to another. Maybe there would be feed, too. His stock sure needed feed. Likely there were horses in White Ridge, and a feed merchant with hay to sell. Ben was willing to sell a few head for fresh meat, in exchange for hay to feed the remainder.

THE TOWN was bigger than it had seemed, and shabbier. The wooden buildings which had been erected were sun-blistered and leaning, the streets dusty, the boardwalks broken. Yet there were plenty of people about, staring curiously at Ben as he jogged his ragged buckskin in the search for Condo's store. In the middle of the street he reined back, and called to a man who loafed against the verandah-post of a saloon.

"Howdy," Ben said. "I'm lookin' for Lou Condo's place. Can you put me on the trail?"

"Stranger, huh?" the lounger drawled, with a tight grin. Then, "Lookin' for Condo's place, huh? Which place?"

"I was told he runs a store in this town," Ben said patiently.

"Sure does," the man drawled. "Also the bank, the town corral, three saloons an' a beanery. Which place was you wantin', stranger?"

Ben laughed, and said, "Guess it's Condo himself I wanta see. Where would I likely find him?"

"Where the money is. Lou ain't never far from a pile o' dinero, mister. The bank's at the end of the street, thataway." He pointed.

Ben hitched his horse to a rail outside the bank. It was called Condo's Trading Bank and Loan Company a building more solid than its fellows, made of heavy split logs and sporting a couple of pine-framed windows.

Ben walked in. A balk-headed clerk behind an iron grille nodded and said, "Howdy; stranger. What can I do for you?"

Ben asked for Lou Condo, and met

the man's dubious gaze with, "It's kinda important...Somethin' about the Gaynor brothers and that bridge they're guarding."

The clerk shrugged and went away to a back room. There was a soft buzz of voices, then Lou Condo came out. Ben knew that he was Condo because he looked like a man who would never be far from a pile of dinero, a lean hombre with shrewd grey eyes and tight lips, smiling a smooth smile that was like a mask to cover his hunger, and wearing expensive clothes that couldn't quite disguise something cheap about the man himself.

"Howdy," he said, his voice soft and deep. "What's all this about my bridge, huh? Anythin' wrong down in Long Knife Canyon?"

"Nothin'," Ben drawled, "except that your men tried to collec' fifty dollars toll from me, so I had to kinda force my way across the bridge. An' seein' that I'm not a fella to run away from what I've done, I kinda looked you up."

"Fifty dollars?" Condo said, his eyebrows raised. "Say, there's some mistake, I reckon. A dollar's all the toll I ask."

"Sure," Ben grinned. "A dollar a head, huh? An' seein' that I was trailin' fifty head o' cattle, the Gaynor boys figured I was up for fifty bucks."

"Cattle, huh?" For a fleeting moment the smile had vanished from Condo's face, but soon it was back. Looking curiously at Ben, he said, "Wal... I guess the boys maybe kept too close to the letter of the law, so to speak. Of course, I wouldn't demand a dollar a head for cattle. But Kel Gaynor wouldn't know what to do, I reckon. We've never had cattle up on the Ridges before."

BEN SMILED slowly. He said, "That wasn't the way of it at all. The Gaynors didn't act like they didn't know what to do. They was danged certain 'bout the fifty dollars ...an' as I didn't have the money I had to get kinda tough. Likely they'll be gunnin' for me now. But I wanted you to know how it was."

"I'll speak to the Gaynors," Condo said sharply. "They won't be gunning for you if I've got any say on the Ridges. But about your cattle. Where're they now?"

"Drinkin' from the stream, east of town," Ben said, jerking his head. "I was wonderin' whether mebbe I could sell a few steers for hay—"

"Sure, sure," Condo said, beaming now, like a man suddenly relieved of a private fear. "No trouble 'bout that, Mr.—"

"Royle," Ben said. "Ben Royle, from Texas."

"Wal, you'll have no trouble sellin' your steers, Mr. Royle. Long time since folks up here have tasted good Texas beef. Mostly we eat salted meat brought down fron Utah by Mormon traders. I'll take your herd off your hands right now, an' pay you in hard cash. Let's see now...the market price is around twelve dollars a carcass, so—"

"Hold it," Ben broke in. "I'm not fixin' to sell the herd. All I wanta do is sell mebbe a couple, so's I can buy feed for the rest."

Now the beaming smile was gone, and Condo shrugged. He said, slowly, "Then what?"

"Then I'll be on my way." Ben drawled.

"Where? I don't savvy you, at all," Condo frowned. "What've you brought cattle to the Ridges for if you don't wanta sell?"

"I aim to settle an' start me a ranch," Ben said, "if it's any of your danged business."

"A ranch? In these rocky hills?" Condo laughed loudly, but to Ben the laugh didn't ring true. "Man, are you loco?"

"Mebbe. What say you let me worry

'bout that, huh? I'm here to pay whatever you say I owe for crossin' your bridge. How much?"

"The hell with it," Condo said. "I'm not worried about an odd dollar. And now, if you'll excuse me, I'm kinda busy—"

"What about beef?" Ben said, as Condo turned to go back to his room. "I mean, you run the town store...likely if I wanta sell a couple o' steers I'll have to sell 'em to you."

"Not interested," Condo said. "The whole fifty head, sure. But the profit on a couple o' carcasses isn't worth botherin' about. You run along an' start your ranch..." With laughter deep in his throat the banker vanished into his office.

BEN DIDN'T begin to understand it. All he knew was that, through no fault of his own, he had made three enemies in this hill country. But most pressing worry of the moment was the problem of keeping his stock alive. He walked around town, leading his tired horse, looking for some likely buyers of his steers. There didn't seem to be any. Condo's Store was the only one in town, a big building with half a dozen assistants behind the well-stocked counters.

At last he gave up. He left his buckskin at Condo's Corral, and parted with three of his last dollars to have the animal washed and fed. Then he strolled into Condo's *Ace Saloon* and called for a drink to wash the trail dust from his throat.

Ben Royle wasn't a hard-drinking man, but right now he was at the end of his tether and low in spirit, and the burning whisky gave him a lift. He had a second, and a third, not caring much about the dwindling supply of coins in his pocket. By the time he'd sunk the fourth, he'd developed a glowing resentment against Lou Condo, the man who'd refused to buy a couple of steers because the profit wasn't worth bothering about.

"This is lousy whisky," he drawled to the barkeep. "There's water in it, I reckon."

The barkeep was a melancholy man with face like a full moon. He said, "No water, stranger. It's jus' cheap liquor, that's all. So what? Go to another saloon an' you'll get the same. Condo owns 'em all."

"And buys the cheapest whisky offerin', huh?" Ben grinned. "Yeh... that's Condo, I reckon. You wanta know somethin', mister?"

"I know it already," the barkeep said gloomily. "You don't like Condo. Neither do I. He works me hard an' pays me short. What has he done to you?"

"Killed a dream—" Ben hurled his empty glass against a wall, swearing savagely. Then he told the barkeep about his herd of cattle and the urgent need to feed them. He said, "Down the street aways I saw a feed merchant's store, an' it doesn't belong to Condo. I could buy hay there if I had the money. But Condo won't buy any beef, so I can't raise the money..."

"Beef?" The barkeep's expression was gloomier than ever. He said. "Fella, we haven't tasted fresh beef in this doggone town for months. If I was you I'd mosey along the c r e e k aways, west o' town, an' kinda have a little chat to the miners. Those boys are ready to sell their washpans for fresh meat."

IT WAS an idea, and hope came to life once more in Ben's heart. He paid for the glass he'd smashed, left the saloon and walked west along the creek.

Soon he was among the tents and make-shift huts which served the miners for home. The dwellings housed whole families, women cooking at outside fireplaces and mending clothes, while the children, whose fathers scratched and washed for gold, played along the bank of the stream.

Ben Royle walked on and at last

came to a group of men sifting "color" in mid-stream. A freckled man with ginger hair looked up as he approached, and Ben nodded.

"Howdy, mister. Got some beef to sell, if you're interested."

The man shrugged, still gently cradling his pan of mud and sand. He said, "Got all the beef we need, stranger. Condo's store supplies this town, at ten cents a can."

There was something about the way he said it, like a man smarting under an injustice that couldn't be rectified. Ben Royle laughed.

"Mister, you've got me wrong. My beef ain't in cans...it's alive an' walking."

The redheaded man lost interest in his pan, and several men nearby jerked eager glances at Ben.

Six or seven men sloshed out of the stream toward Ben, eagerness lighting their eyes. Ben said, "It's no joke, fellas. I've got a herd an' aim to take 'em further north, but I'm forced to sell a couple o' cows to get money for feed."

"A couple?" Now they were grouped about Ben, protesting in chorus. "Stranger, there's mebbe sixty families along this creek. How far're two steers gonna go!"

"All right..." Ben wasn't a man to try to drive a one-sided bargain, and now he made a quick decision. He said, "I'll let ten cows go...at the market price. Twelve dollars a head."

"It's a deal," the redhead said. Then, as the others hurried in all directions to spread the good news, he shook Ben's hand. "You're a white man, stranger. Up here along the Ridges beef is worth more than market price. You could've asked twenty dollars, an' we'd have paid."

"I wouldn't try to cash in on folks' hunger," Ben shrugged.

"That's what I figured. My name's Wyman...Seth, they call me."

Ben liked the freckled man and figured that here was a chance to make a friend. If he was going to stay in the Ridges he was sure going to need friends, he thought. He said, "Pleased to meet you, Seth. I'm Ben Royle. Let's go an' cut out ten steers from my herd."

Together they walked back through the town and east of it, where the cattle rested along the creek bank. As they walked, Ben told of his trouble at the Long Knife bridge, and of how Condo had refused to buy a couple of steers.

"He's the son of a French Canadian an' a Comanche squaw," Seth said. "Seems to me he's kinda inherited more Comanche than French. A fella like that bears watchin', he sure does."

The two men selected ten steers and drove them leisurely through the town to the miners' huts. There was a lot of excitement, women and children milling about happily at sight of the long-needed meat.

The steers were left far along the creek bank, to the mercy of two miners who'd once been butchers. Back among the huts, the men held a money-juggling conference and Seth Wyman poured a hundred and twenty dollars into Ben's hands.

"Now for that doggoned hay," Ben grinned. "Man, this deal has saved me a heap o' grief."

"That's fine." Wyman said. Then, "Look, Ben, if you're fixin' to stay in town overnight, while the herd's feedin', I can put you up. I got a good hut an' no family."

"Thanks, fella, but..." Ben frowned. "Reckon I'll camp with the herd. I'm kinda rememberin' that warnin' you gave me."

"Mebbe you're wise," Seth said. "Anyways, you've gotta eat with me tonight. That I insist on."

So Ben was the guest of his new friend, and after the evening meal they smoked and yarned. To the Texan who'd come so far with only the cattle for company, it was an en-

joyable night. But soon he tore himself away, anxious about his herd.

The feed merchant had carried bales of hay by wagon and left them opened along the eastern creek bank. Now, under the stars, the cows still munched contentedly. Ben found a place to camp, bunked down and rested. From here, if anyone interfered with his herd, he would be alerted quickly and snap into action.

He lit a cigaret and lay listening to the silence—until it was broken by the soft fall of approaching feet. Ben tensed, and got to his feet, one hand on the gun at his thigh. Then a figure shaped white in the gloom, close to him. It was a woman.

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BEN'S HAT came off in polite greeting. Under the stars the young woman's bare head seemed white, and he guessed that her hair was yellow or golden. She wore a light - colored dress, flaring prettily from a trim waist, so that he knew that she was young, little more than a girl.

All this he saw as he greeted her with Good night, mam. Did you wanta see me?"

She had come boldly to him in the dark and then seemed a little embarrassed and tongue-tied, but under his easy politeness she found her voice.

"I heard some talk," she said softly. "Bad talk...I wasn't supposed to hear it at all. But I must warn you. They mean you great harm..." She hesitated.

"Kinda nice of you to warn me, mam," Ben said. "Who's out to hurt me? Mebbe if you told me jus' what happened..."

"Yes...I'll tell you, Mr. Royle. I know your name, the whole town's talking about you an' the fresh beef you brought in. I'm Diane Sanderson, and I work at the *Arrow Cafe*. I'm a waitress there. And tonight I overheard these two men talking about you...they're going to follow you out of town and...and kill you..."

"Which two men?" Ben prompted. "An' why do they aim to kill me?"

"I don't know why," the girl said, urgently. "All I know is that they're planning to follow you when you leave. They're Kit Ferris and Cline Mason. They're bad men, Mr. Royle...especially Mason."

Her voice was low and tense, and she kept looking back toward the town lights, like she was afraid of something.

There was a silence, and she seemed to sense his curiosity about her backward glances. She said, "Cline Mason was sort of telling the plan to Ferris, as if he'd got the instructions from somebody else. I heard him say your name, and the words 'trail him out of town' and 'kill.' I was at the table putting their meals down and Mason hadn't realised that I was at his elbow. He kept looking at me after that, like he was trying to fathom whether I'd heard what had been said. I...I tried to act natural, like I hadn't heard a thing. Then at ten o'clock, after the cafe closed, I sneaked out the back way in case he was watching the place."

There was a clear frankness about her voice, so that Ben didn't doubt her for a moment. He was touched, and full of admiration for her courage. He found himself wishing that he could see her face properly. All he could see in the starlight was the white face and wealth of hair, and the shine of wide eyes.

"Seems to me you took a big chance, an' jus' to warn a stranger," he said.

"Well...there's more to it than that," Diane Sanderson said hesitantly. "I'll be honest, Mr. Royle. The

thought of anybody being murdered horrifies me, of course, but I'm also out to cross that Cline Mason whenever the chance offers. He's a beast, and I hate him. It's a long story, Mr. Royle...but Mason murdered my uncle, Jed Sanderson, back in New Mexico."

"I see," Ben said. He peered at her in the dark, then spread a blanket from his bunk. He said, "If you'd care to sit down an' tell me 'bout it, Miss Sanderson..."

SHE TOOK awhile to make up her mind, glancing back at the town and looking doubtfully at Ben. The Texan stepped away from the spread blanket and sat on his bunk. Then the girl lowered to the blanket, and sighed.

"It's a nasty story, Mr. Royle. My Uncle Jed was a battler, trying to make his Long Y ranch pay though it was on the dry side of San Jose Valley and a pretty hopeless proposition. But he was a happy old man who wouldn't have hurt anyone. Everybody liked him. I know, because I lived on the Long Y since my parents were killed in a train smash when I was ten.

"Then a Government development scheme reached New Mexico, and it became known that they were planning a dam for the San Jose River. It seemed like it would be the end of Uncle's worries, even though two or three years would pass before the dam was finished. Uncle was deeply in debt, you see, but because it was recognised that the dam would turn his ranch into a paying concern, watering his land and changing the whole face of his range, the creditors were willing to wait.

"Then a man named Cline Mason came to San Jose Valley and wanted to buy the Long Y. Uncle laughed. He said that if he'd got an offer for it a year earlier he'd have been glad to sell, but with the promised dam in the picture he wouldn't sell for the world. Water was the one thing he needed to make the Y a success. Uncle was especially amused because of the ridiculously low price Mason offered. Mason said he represented a syndicate of businessmen who'd had the Long Y valued by a valuator."

"Did he offer any proof?" Ben asked. "That he represented a syndicate, I mean?"

"Yes. He showed Uncle Jed papers from..." She hesitated, thinking back. Then, "Yes, I remember now. The syndicate was called Rangeland Investments. Of course, they were out to get the Long Y for a song, and sell it at a huge profit when the dam was completed. Uncle treated it as an attempt at a piece of shrewd business, and forgot about it. He didn't realise that the syndicate had no intention of forgetting about it.

"That Cline Mason kept calling and pestering Uncle Jed, but the offered price was never raised. Uncle Jed at last got angry and ordered Mason to stay off his property. Then...then one day I was out riding a little pinto I used to own...and I heard a shot in the hills. Just one shot. I topped a rise, and saw a man ride away from behind a rocky outcrop. He was Cline Mason. I recognised the wide, yellow hat he wore, and the big black horse he always rode. I...I headed for the outcrop...and found Uncle Jed dead. He'd been shot through the head. That was just three years ago, when I was nineteen...and I still see poor uncle, at times, lying there dead—"

Ben was silent awhile, respecting the girl's feelings. Then he said, "I don't understand, Miss Sanderson. Why did Mason kill your uncle?"

"Don't you see?" the girl said. "Uncle was up to his ears in debt. When he died the creditors clamored for their money, and the syndicate cleared the debts and took possession of the ranch. It was all planned legally by a bunch of smart lawyers and went through without a hitch. Evidently they'd employed Cline Mason to try to buy the

ranch for a song if possible, and when that failed they planned to get it the other way."

"And what 'bout this Mason hombre?" Ben asked. "Wasn't he ever caught?"

"Caught?" Diane's voice was bitter. "He didn't even bother to run. I told my story to the Marshal, and Mason was arrested and tried. The trial was a farce. Mason produced a bunch of friends to prove that he'd been playing poker in a San Jose saloon at the time of the killing. Oh, it was all planned, I tell you, right to the last detail."

"Sure was a nasty set-up," Ben said softly. "And you say that the same Cline Mason is right here in White Ridge, huh? Doesn't he recognise you?"

"I don't think so. It's hard to say. He looks at me a lot...but his type always stare at girls. He might not know who I am. I didn't meet him at the Long Y, just saw him talking to Uncle Jed at different times. And by the time I gave my story in court I was very sick with shock and grief. Now I'm myself again...so he maybe doesn't connect me with the girl at the San Jose trial."

BEN WAS very interested, and curious. He said, "Those danged unscrup'lous friends o' Mason, the ones who alibied him...do you remember their names?"

"Kit Ferris was one," the girl said at once. "Then there were two brothers named Gaynor...and some others I've forgotten."

Mention of the Gaynors was a surprise, and started Ben's thoughts moving in an unexpected direction. But before they'd moved far, there was a faint scuffling sound in sagebush nearby, and he heard the girl gasp.

"What was that?" she whispered loudly, scrambling to her feet. Ben got up, too, and stepped close to her.

"Jus' a jackrabbit, mebbe... I don't see anybody." He was peering in the starlight, certain that if anyone was moving about he would see them. Then he said, "You're scared, Miss Sanderson. I'll walk back to town with you, huh? Where d'you live?"

"In a room above the *Arrow Cafe,*" she said. "It's run by an old friend of poor Uncle Jed, Mrs. Johnson. I went to her when Uncle died and those wolves took over the Long Y. I sure would appreciate your company, Mr. Royle."

They walked slowly townward, Ben said, "I'd like to kinda thank you for warnin' me about that Cline Mason."

"You already have," she reminded him.

"Yes, I know. But I'd like to again. Seems like, if Mason does suspect that you overheard his talk with Ferris, you took a long chance comin' to see me. I sure won't forget it, Miss Sanderson, an' if there's ever anythin' I can do for you—"

"It's all right," she broke in softly. "I guess I only imagined that Mason was suspicious..." Then, curiously, "Why...would he want to kill you, Mr. Royle?"

Ben shrugged.

Now they were walking the broken boardwalks, and when they came to a darkened store-front that sported the sign *Arrow Cafe,* the girl said, "I'll slip in the back way...down the alley at the side."

He went down the alley with her. A light showed in a back room and Diane Sanderson paused at the door.

"Now I'll be safe enough," she said softly. "Good night, Mr. Royle."

She pushed the door open, and in the brief instant before she passed inside, the light was on her face.

That flashing glimpse of loveliness stayed with Ben Royle as he strolled back to his herd. He reached his bunk and lay down, looking at the stars and reverting his thoughts to the worries of the moment.

He didn't sleep much that night. The morning dawned fine but cloudy, the northern sky spread with darkness, and he thought that heavy rain in that direction might be all to the good when he got moving again. At least it would assure a supply of water. Ben was figuring to rest and feed the herd for another full day, and pull out the next morning.

HE SPENT the morning at Condo's store, buying provisions to replenish his packs, then checked on the treatment of his horse at the town corral. He lunched at the *Arrow Cafe*. Diane seemed shy, like a girl slightly embarrassed at her action of the previous night. But she was beautiful like Ben remembered, and though they didn't talk much he was pleased just to look at her soft loveliness each time she came to his table.

But he lingered awhile when the meal was finished, and the girl seemed to conquer her shyness to smile at him. He said, "That sure was a tasty meal, an' you can tell Mrs. Jackson I said so."

"Mrs. Johnson," she corrected.

"And you can tell her I'll be back for another tonight," Ben grinned. "After so long on the trail, I sure do appreciate good cookin'."

"You're not pulling out today, Mr. Royle?"

"Tomorrow, I guess," he answered, and saw the shadow of anxiety cross her face. He said, "I'll be real careful."

She was clearing the things from his table and taking longer than was necessary. She said, awkwardly, "How far . . . where are you taking your herd, Mr. Royle? Oh, I know it's no business of mine, but . . . well, folks say you're a nice man but maybe a little crazy. D'you really expect to find grazing range among these terrible rocks and ridges?"

"Sure do," Ben said. "But I don't blame folks for bein' kinda doubtful. Before I hit the White Ridge I was beginnin' to be doubtful myself."

"And you're not doubtful any more?"

"Not since a lotta folks I'd never met began to act like they didn't want me around," Ben said slowly. "I've kinda got a theory 'bout it."

He left the cafe and walked along the creek to the mining huts where men ate in the midday shade. The sun was out now, though dark clouds still lingered in the north. From the shade of a hut wall a voice hailed, and Ben quickened his step to join the grinning Seth Wyman.

They yarned for awhile, shared cigarets from Ben's sack of Durham and lazed against the hut. It was good to be with Wyman. Ben Royle had an instinct about men, and knew that in the nearby muddy outfit of the gold-scratcher there stood a man worth knowing. After a lot of easy small-talk, he switched the conversation to something which had come to mind quite suddenly, the germ of an idea that might make the difference between success and failure.

"You told me you had no family yesterday, Seth," he said slowly. "I take it you've jus' never settled down, huh?"

"You take it right," Wyman grinned. "Family's all right, I guess, if you're the kinda guy that doesn't mind bein' hogtied. Me, I like my freedom. I like to go where I like, an' stay as long as I want. Plumb selfish, I guess."

Ben laughed and said, "D'you get much color from the creek?"

"Reg'lar supply o' dust," Wyman shrugged. "Reg'lar but light. Man could earn as much ridin' herd in the cattle country, I guess."

"Then you ain't keen on stayin' here?" Ben asked.

"Nope. Been here a year now, an' that's longer than I usually stay anywhere. It's the uncertainty, I reckon. Man might pick up a fortune, kinda

sudden, any time...so he keeps scratchin', and hopin'."

"With me it's different," Ben said. "I'm a cattleman born an' bred, and I don't wanta dig for my fortune. I wanta see it growin' all around me. Beef on the hoof."

"I can understand that," Wyman said. "But I'm danged if I can figure why you've come to the Ridges."

"Then I'll tell you," Ben said. He pointed to the dark north. "Up there, somewhere, there's good rangeland. A valley of grass an' alfalfa, sixty miles wide an' God knows how long. It's in unsettled territory, an' the Gov'ment laws say that if I bunk down with a herd o' cows on unsettled territory the land is mine.

"I aim to find that valley, Seth. There'll be room for a cattleman to live an' grow, there. It's what I've always wanted. Trouble is, I find I can't do it alone. I figured I could...but I was plumb wrong."

"That so?" Wyman asked. And there was an eagerness in his smile. "Keep talkin', Ben Royle. I'm listenin'."

"I need a partner," Ben said, and his gaze held Wyman's, and saw the answer shining plainly.

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BEN SAID, "I'm kinda worried 'bout you, Miss Sanderson."

It was after sundown, and he had eaten another of Mrs. Johnson's good meals but was reluctant to leave her waitress. Diane smiled at him, and he thought he saw a soft light of sudden understanding in her blue eyes.

"Why should you worry about me?" she wanted to know.

"Why shouldn't I? You took a long chance, coming to warn me 'bout Cline Mason, an' we can't be sure that he doesn't suspect you. Seems to me, if he thinks it over an' decides that you did overhear his plan, he'll take no chances. You'll be in danger. Or if he ever recognises you as the gal who accused him of murder in San Jose—" Then the Texan stopped, slapping a hand on the table as sudden realisation came. "Say! There's your name! Sanderson, the same name as your uncle. Mason must remember that name!"

"Don't worry about it," the girl said. "I'm just a waitress. Most everybody in town—except you—calls me Diane. Not many know my surname, and Mason hasn't been in town long."

"You make it sound like you're as safe as the Cattlemen's Bank," Ben frowned, "but I'm still gonna worry. I'll be hittin' the trail north, with no way o' knowin' whether you're all right."

"And that'll worry you?"

"It sure will!" Impulsively he put his brown hand over her white one on the table. He said, "Tell you what... I'll find a friend of Seth Wyman's an' have him keep an eye on you. I don't know many people here, but if he's a friend of Seth's he'll be all right."

"Really, Mr. Royle, there's no need—"

"Most everybody—except you—calls me Ben. Mebbe we'd better fix that, huh? Could we meet later, after you've knocked off, and kinda talk about it?"

She eased her hand from under his and said, "I don't think so—"

"But if Mason trails me outa town an' kills me, you'll never see me again," Ben grinned. "Then you'll be sorry."

"Please...don't joke about it," she said. Then she smiled a little, but avoided his gaze. "I'll be finished here at ten."

He went to a saloon to kill time, watched a poker game, joining a crowd

round a table where four men played for high stakes. As card-talk passed between the players they called each other by name, and Ben soon discovered that one of them was Kit Ferris. He was a bony man of middle-age, with balding head and a lean, hungry look. Ben wondered whether Cline Mason was about, and marvelled that he'd forgotten to ask Diane for a description of the man.

Anyway he had a good look at Ferris, and would know him anywhere after this. As he turned from the card game he met a lazy-eyed gaze close to his face, and saw recognition light the eyes of George Gaynor.

The unexpected meeting was a shock, producing a natural reaction. Ben Royle's forty-five was half-out of his holster before he realised that Gaynor had made no move to draw. The short man smiled lazily, but with venom.

"Kinda nervous, huh, Royle? I don't blame you. Any hombre who cracks George Gaynor over the skull an' leaves him roped, sure has reason to be jumpy. But you can relax. I ain't gunnin' for you tonight. You'll keep."

He had spoken softly, close to Ben, so that bystanders were unaware of any enmity between them. In the same tone Ben said, "Thanks. Reckon I'd jus' as soon have the showdown now an' be done with it. Seein' that you ain't doin' anythin' else at the moment."

"Trouble is, it ain't convenient at the moment," Gaynor grinned. Then he lifted a wrist and let his shirt sleeve fall a little, showing a mass of heavy bandages. He said, "You roped us good an' tight, Kel an' I. We couldn't beat the ropes. In the end I had to smash the cabin window an' saw my wrist-ropes on the broken glass. Kinda awkward, see. Gashed my arm an' lost a lot of blood. But I heal kinda fast, fella, an' you'll keep." He swung away and left the saloon.

BEN WONDERED whether Kel was in town. Then he saw the freckled face of Seth Wyman, and joined him. Seth was drinking at the bar, and said, "Seein' that I'm pullin' north tomorrow an' leavin' the joys of town life behind, I'm stowin' away some o' Condo's lousy whisky. Join me?"

"Later in the night," Ben said. "I've got a reason."

"All right." Then Seth looked at him curiously. "What were you jawin' with George Gaynor 'bout? Somethin' unpleasant, I'll bet."

"He's got a gashed gun-arm," Ben said. "He's sore at me. I was stingin' him, tryin' to make him draw."

"You was?" Seth gulped whisky, his eyes popping. "Man, are you loco? George is the fastest gunslinger this side o' hell. Unless you're damned quick yourself, he'd kill you sure."

"I ain't quick," Ben grinned. "Accurate enough once I've got my gun out, but no quicker than the average, honest citizen. That's why I tried to make him draw, don't you see, while his arm's bad. Mebbe I'd have matched him thataway. But he didn't fall for it. If I have to fight him some day when his arm's all right, it'll be curtains for Ben Royle. But that's only one o' my worries—"

He went on to tell about Diane Sanderson. He had already told of the San Jose murder, but now he related his worries for the girl's safety and his plan to have a man watch over her.

Seth was all for it. He said, "If Cline Mason is gonna trail us outa town, like you say Diane says, then she'll be safe once he's gone. But likely he'll give us a day or two start, seein' that he aims to do his killin' well away from town. I'll fix for a fella to watch the gal until Mason pulls out."

Later, Ben met Diane and talked with her at the door behind the cafe. The talk covered a lot of ground. He told her of the arrangement to guard her from Mason. She told him to be

careful, and wanted to know how she'd ever find out whether he'd found his rangeland. Ben said that was easy enough to answer. And after a lot of soft and eager talk she knew that, once established on a range of his own, he would be coming back to claim her.

It was late by the time he got back to the saloon, but Wyman was waiting for him. They drank to the success of their partnership, washed it down with a second, and parted.

It was with very mixed feelings that Ben went back to his bunk on the creekbank. Apart from being baffled over the sinister plot against him, he was happy that tomorrow would see him pushing on toward his dream once more. Again, this happiness was sobered at the prospect of being away from Diane. Right now, he couldn't come to any definite conclusion as to whether, finally, he was happy or not.

His thoughts were broken by the crack of a twig somewhere behind.

He could see no movement. Yet he felt that somebody was back there, in the shadows. Some one had followed him from town, he figured, and they were now frozen still, watching him. Grimly he eased the gun in his holster.

He walked on, right to his bunk near the resting steers. He sat down, rolling a smoke but not lighting it. He wasn't figuring to make himself a target for a six-gun. Then, after long moments, his nerves tingled as he heard a soft footfall. It was very close.

WAITING motionless, his form dissolved into the shadows so close to the ground, Ben was able to see the dark movement of a form against the flickering town lights. The man was maybe ten feet away, peering in the night, vainly trying to spot Ben. The Texan saw the vague whiteness of something in his hand.

And then the man moved silently to the bunk, the white thing in his hand probing the shadow. Ben grabbed the outstretched wrist. There was a curious cry, like a startled, choking gasp, as Ben closed with a short and heavy form and struggled with it.

Not that there was much of a struggle. Ben was surprised when the man went down easily, the white thing fluttering away in the dark. Quickly Ben dropped, straddling the intruder and digging hard fingers at the fat throat.

"Hold it...I'm not fightin', dang you," a mournful voice protested. The voice was vaguely familiar to Ben, and he stopped trying to choke it off. Instead, he groped for matches from his pocket, still straddling the heavy form.

"Let's have a look at you," he said, and flared a match.

In the pale light he saw a fleshy face, with doleful eyes and the sad lines of a pessimist. It was a surprise, and Ben frowned.

"I know you," he said. "You're the barkeep at one o' Condo's saloons. What're you doin', sneakin' around my camp? I had you figured for a friend ...you sure put me on to a way of sellin' some steers."

"I'm still your friend, fella," the man gurgled. "If you let me up, I'll tell you 'bout it. I don't talk so good...with a man stacked up on my belly."

He wasn't packing a gun. Ben let him up. He brushed dust from his clothes and said, "If you want proof o' me bein' a friend, find that bit o' paper I was toting. I figured to leave it where you'd find it, and skip. I wasn't lookin' for thanks."

Ben flared more matches, and found the paper. By matchlight he read the message that was scrawled on it, and a great wave of eager warmth welled up in him.

The note said: *If you want to find the Valley of Grass head northwest from town and rive between the two high peaks dead ahead. You can't mistake the peaks as they are the highest on the Ridge country. The valley is*

forty miles away, just beyond the peaks.

Ben took it all in, feeling mighty excited, until a warning of caution breathed into him. Then he looked at the barkeep. "Start talkin', fella. Who sent you?"

"Nobody. Jus' thought I'd do you a good turn, that's all."

"Thanks a lot," Ben said. "But what was the idea of sneakin' around that way? Me, when I wanta do a friend a good turn, I face him with it."

"I've got a reason," the man said awkwardly. "Let's leave it at that, huh? Now you can drive straight to the valley."

"Sure, but..." Ben was still puzzled. "How come you knew I was lookin' for the Valley of Grass? I never mentioned it to you?"

"I ain't a fool, mister. Jus' a barkeep, mebbe, but not a fool. Why in hell would you bring cows to the Ridges if you wasn't lookin' for the valley?"

Ben nodded slowly, peering in the night, trying to read the fat man's face. He said. "You've kinda solved my problem, an' I'm mighty thankful, if this note tells the truth. On the other hand, you work in a saloon run by a man who's no friend o' mine. I'd sure hate to think that I was headin' into a cunning little trap of some sort."

"The valley's where I say," the barkeep insisted. "If you want to go there, go there. Or go to hell if you want... I'm goin' back to my room—"

"Wait a minute," Ben said quickly. "I don't wanta seem ungrateful, fella. But you've gotta admit—"

"Look, let's not go into any more," the barkeep said. "I work for a guy who works me long an' pays me short, like I done told you the other day. I hate Condo! That's the reason I tried to slip you this note. I'm not sayin' any more. If you've got any danged brains at all, work it out for yourself."

He turned away, and Ben heard his footsteps fade in the night.

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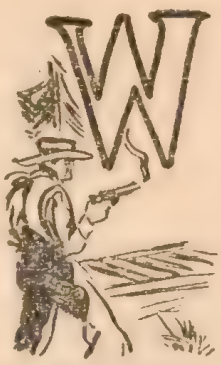

WHEN BEN ROYLE and Seth Wyman pulled out of White Ridge they were well stocked with provisions and trail gear. Both saddlepacks bulged, while each man carried a six-gun, a Winchester repeater, and belts of ammunition. Ben was ready for trouble, and had gone to great pains to impress Wyman that the drive would be a dangerous undertaking.

Then other thoughts crowded his brain and he frowned. He said "Seth, did you fix for a fella to keep an eye on Diane?"

"Sure did, Texan. Man named Dave Jones. I can trust him. He's gonna enlist a friend, an' between 'em they'll guard the gal day and night till Cline Mason leaves town. That all right?"

"It's fine," Ben said. "It's one worry off my mind, anyways. And now I'll tell you what we're gonna do, Seth. See those high an' mighty peaks towerin' in the mist to the northwest? Wal, we're headin' between 'em. And on the other side o' the pass we're gonna find the Valley o' Grass...or somebody was lyin'."

"You mean you've found out where the valley is?"

"Mebbe..." and Ben told of the happenings of last night.

He told it all, Wyman listening interestedly but with the touch of doubt that had bothered Ben. The redhead said, "That sure was a funny way to do you a turn, sneakin' around like a scared coyote."

"Sure is," Ben said thoughtfully. "But I've been thinkin'. It makes as much sense as all the other crazy things that've happened to me. First I was kinda discouraged from crossin'

the bridge back at Long Knife Canyon. Then at White Ridge, Lou Condo showed that he didn't want me or my herd clutterin' up the Ridges. Then Diane heard Cline Mason an' Kit Ferris plannin' to kill me. Let's look at all that, Seth, and see what we get."

"I'm lookin'," Wyman said. "What d'we get?"

"The only possible answer," Ben grinned. "People lookin' for grazin' range on the Ridges ain't popular. That's why the bridge is down there at Long Knife, with its plumb outrageous toll to turn herders in another direction.

"And why? Because the only grazing range among the Ridges is the Valley of Grass. The way I see it, Lou Condo, who seems to run an' own most everthin' in these parts, also wants to own the Valley o' Grass. That's why herders ain't wanted up here."

"All right," Seth said, sliding his hat back to scratch a puzzled head. "So he wants the valley to himself. That's aint no reason he should hire killers to stop you. Condo's been in the Ridge country long enough to start a bank, a string o' saloons an' other businesses. In that time he could've taken over the valley. All he had to do was flop a herd there an' put in a claim to the Gov'ment."

"You're right," Ben said, grinning. "But there's some unknown factor in it somewhere...maybe I'll figure it out if I keep thinkin' about it."

All that day, while the sun climbed, hovered, then began its westward fall, they drove the tiny herd toward the peaks. The peaks were still perhaps thirty miles away, their lofty crowns lost in raincloud. Ever since Ben had been at White Ridge there had been signs of rain to the north, and he got to thinking that the much-sought Valley of Grass would be a lush place indeed, green and rich with nourishment for his herd.

It was a pitifully small herd, but enough to satisfy Government rules for the taking over of range in unsettled territory. That was Ben's main object. There would be plenty of time after that, time to grow and multiply, the years slowly building his reward.

It was a long day in the saddle, but the two men stuck it out until sundown, anxious to reach the valley as soon as possible and willing to skip lunch because of it. At sundown they found a flat coulee of skimpy grass and sage, with a fresh stream nearby. They struck camp.

Over a good meal of bacon and biscuit, they discussed plans for the night. Ben said, "Reckon Mason an' Ferris won't take long to catch us up, once they leave town. Don't take long for a couple o' riders to catch a plodding herd. Reckon we'd better do half a night's watch each, huh? I'll take the first half."

NOTHING happened during the long six hours, and when Ben retired to his bunk the next six hours passed as quietly. He woke up to find Wyman, already making coffee at a fire, his rough face split in a grin.

But later, packed up and on their way once more, they found that nearing the peaks was a more difficult job than it looked. The country was very broken, a maze of narrow trails and canyons among sage-dotted ridges; a twisted, baked mess of territory in which they frequently came to a dead-end of rock or precipice and had to retrace their tracks to try another way.

It was a disappointing day, until late in the afternoon when they found a wider, straighter trail and at last made some real northing. But the sun sank quickly after that, and soon they were camped in a rocky pass only a few miles from the previous stop.

Wyman shrugged and grinned.

"I sure hope that Mason an' his side-winder have as much danged

trouble as we're having," he said. "One thing's sure. We've left such a mess o' cattle-tracks up and down these ridges, Mason ain't gonna know which way to trail us."

Ben shook his head. "No. . .I reckon you're wrong. They likely know the way to the valley. I reckon we're on the right trail now, but Mason'll likely hit it without messin' about. I've got a feelin' we'll need to keep a sharp watch tonight, pard."

They ate well, washing it down with coffee, then yarned and smoked for awhile. The dusk melted into blackness, but there were no stars overhead. The black clouds had spread during the day, and in the breeze there was a freshness that spoke of rain.

It was Wyman's turn to take first watch, and Ben hit bunk and was soon sleeping. When he woke up to find the redhead shaking him, he started up urgently.

"What is it. . .are they here?"

Seth grinned. "They're miles away, Texan. But they're on our trail. From the ridge behind I could jus' see their campfire, like a speck o' light."

"Then why'd you wake me—" Ben started to growl.

"It's midnight, Texan. You done slept like a babe. Up you get."

Ben grinned ruefully and climbed to his feet. It seemed only a few minutes since he'd hit the bunk. Seth passed him the Winchester and settled down, and before he'd walked a dozen yards the redhead was snoring.

Ben went to the ridge and looked backtrail. Sure enough he saw the campfire, and from its size and flicker he judged it to be maybe six or seven miles away. Not far from where he and Seth had camped last night, he figured, though he wasn't too sure about the accuracy of his judgment. Distances at night are very deceiving.

He squatted on the ridge-top. Behind him was the camp, with Seth bunked down near the dying fire, while to his left the herd rested and—

It hit Ben kind of suddenly, the fact that it was after midnight and Seth slept back there near the dying fire. Of course! Any campfire would be dying by now. Any honest campfire. But the distant one still blazed. Ben could tell by its color and the way it flickered that it still blazed.

There was something queer about that. Why would any campfire still be burning strongly at this hour? There could be some simple explanation, of course, but in the last few amazing days Ben had come across situations where the explanations were far from simple. For that reason he was uneasy now. He sat smoking, and puzzling about the fire, but if there was an answer to the puzzle it eluded him. Afterwards, of course, he called himself a fool for not having guessed the answer.

WHEN ACTION came it was sudden, and for one confusing moment Ben thought all hell had broken loose. Gunfire thundered away on his right, a volley of six-gun shots splitting the night and rousing the steers to frightened bellowing. It made a hideous chorus—but Ben didn't have time to think about it. Almost as soon as the racket started, the Texan was rolling desperately, dropping his rifle and groping for his forty-five while a hail of bullets spattered the ground about him.

Ben's brain worked as quickly as his scrabbling body. As his gun came from the holster he knew that the spattering bullets around him were coming from a group of boulders nearby. He could see the gunflashes. It was two separate attacks, one against him while the other stampeded the cattle.

Another shot from the boulders was uncomfortably close, and Ben rolled again. He came up hard against a high slope of rock, and began to work his way round its base. Out on the flat, the steers were milling and trampling,

still stirred by the gun fire. Ben knew that they would run, and keep running. He was suddenly sick with despair.

Another shot brought him back to the dangerous realities, and quickly he snaked round his rock and upward to higher ground.

A moment later he saw a flash from the boulders. Keeping the position in mind, he aimed down from his height and threw a shot. There was a howl in the darkness, rising for a moment above the hellish din of gunfire, stampeding cattle and yelling men.

Not sure about how effective his shot had been, he waited. He heard the wrathful shouts of Seth Wyman joining the din out on the flat. The cattle were thundering away now, their frightened bellows fading in the distance. Ben fired another shot at the boulders, but nobody took the opportunity to fire at his gunflash. Swiftly he left his rock and sprinted toward the rumpus on the nearby flat.

Out there, two men were shooting at each other, both swearing savagely. Ben saw the two lots of gunflashes and was baffled. He knew one man was Seth, and had no way of knowing which. Then the problem was left to work itself out, as suddenly a hurtling horse and rider boomed out of the darkness and was upon Ben before he could move.

The impact crashed him yards along the ground and the flying hoofs followed up, so that for a few breathless moments he expected his skull to be smashed like an eggshell. Then he stopped skidding, and the hoofs thundered by, and a moment later Ben sank into a velvet blackness that was darker than the cloud-bound night.

He came alive to the probing flare of a match, and beyond its light he saw the homely face of Wyman. The miner grinned at him, and said, "Wal, thank goodness you're alive. You had me kinda baffled. Dead to the world, but no bullet punctures. What happened?"

"Believe it or not," Ben said dazedly, "I was knocked down by a hoss."

"Let it be a lesson to you," Seth grinned. "Always look both way before—"

"Hey!" Ben cried, sitting up and staring at a red mess that trickled from Wyman's arm. "You've been hit. Is it...bad?"

"Naw..." The match flickered out and Seth walked away in the darkness. "Ain't nothin' but a scratch. I feel fine—" Then his legs folded under him and he crashed to the ground.

Ben dragged the tall miner to the fireside, and stirred the embers to a glow that gave some light. He looked at the wound in Wyman's upper arm, a deep flesh wound in which the cruel lead still rested. Quickly Ben heated the blade of a jack-knife, figuring that if he hurried he'd have the slug out while Seth was still unconscious and save him some pain.

THE REDHEAD came to as Ben was bandaging the arm.

"Did I fall asleep?" he asked. "What d'you know...must be all this tough trail-drivin' makin' me tired, huh?"

"Mebbe," Ben grinned. "Or it could've been that a bullet was restin' against your arm-bone. It ain't any more."

"Thanks, Ben," Wyman said quietly. Then he struggled up, forgetting his pain like the tough hombre he was. "What now? An' what in hell happened, anyways?"

"I'll tell you what happened," Ben said. "You an' me, we was fooled like a couple o' greenhorn dudes."

"That so? How come?"

"That fire backtrail," Ben grinned. "That nice bright fire. Not just a heap o' embers, mind you, like any campfire at midnight. No, sir...a fire kept burnin' to attact our attention an' make us feel that the enemy was miles away while he sneaked in an' caught us by surprise. An ol' Injun trick."

"An' how many hombres attacked

us?" Seth asked. "Me, I'm still kinda confused. . . I woke up to find hell roarin' all around."

"Reckon there was three," Ben said. "I think I shot one. Then while you were shootin' it out with another, a third high-tailed it outa here an' knocked me down. What happened to the hombre you were fighting?"

"Think I winged him," Seth said. "He rode off, yellin' like crazy. He was the one doin' most of the shootin' an' hootin' around the herd. I was sure mad at that boy."

"But he did his job." Ben frowned. "Those cows won't stop runnin' for hours, I guess. By the time we catch up with 'em—dang blast it, I might as well face it, Seth. I'm about beaten!"

"Only time a man's beaten is when he's six feet under the ground, Texan," Wyman grinned. "You know it—it's jus' that you're a little down-hearted at the moment."

"I'd hate to feel plumb disappointed." Ben growled. "Let's go see if I killed my man, huh? We can't start trailin' my herd till mornin', nohow."

Together they went to the group of boulders from where Ben had been attacked. Ben flared matches and found the body.

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THE THIN face was easy to recognise, despite the ugliness of a bullet-hole through one cheek. Ben grinned rather grimly.

"One less to worry 'bout, anyways. That's Cline Mason's sidewinder, Kit Ferris. I saw him playin' cards in town. Sure hope he was luckier at cards than at shootin' in the dark. That shot o' mine was one hell of a lucky one, huh?"

"If that's what you do in the dark," Seth grinned, "I'd sure hate to shoot it out with you in daylight."

"Wonder what Mason'll do when Ferris doesn't show up back at their camp," Ben said. "I was supposed to be killed, remember. When Ferris doesn't show up, Mason'll guess I'm still alive. Ferris' part in the raid was to get me, see?"

"Then likely the Mason hombre'll play a return match," Seth said. "I sure hope he was the one I winged. Reckon we'd better keep watch again?"

"Sure do. But it's still my watch. You go back to sleep, Seth."

The redhead was glad to obey, the pain in his arm more severe than he pretended. Ben went back to his ridge-top and saw that the distant fire wasn't so bright or flickering. It was being let die now he knew. And he wondered how many people were concerned in the treacherous raid.

More than the three who'd actually taken part, he figured. They must have taken quite a time to cover the six or seven miles of such rugged country in the dark, which meant that somebody else stayed behind to keep the fire fed. A moment before the attack it had been burning brightly.

So that there were four enemies on the trail originally. There were three now. Cline Mason was one. Who were the other two? The Gaynor brothers, mebbe? Of course, there could have been more than one man remaining by the fire, so that there could be more than three left. The thoughts stirred restlessly in Ben's angry brain, helping to dull his despair at losing the herd.

For the remaining hours until dawn he watched alertly, but there was no further incident. Before sun-up the two had taken breakfast and were in the saddle, setting out to find the lost cows.

Trailing them over the dusty passes between ridges was easy enough, the way of their passing showing plainly.

They had run to the east, taking the natural path from passage to passage between rises and boulder-strewn ridges. Ben and Seth Wyman heeled their mounts to a fast pace but without much hope.

But the hope rocketed two hours later when Ben swung his buckskin round a rocky outcrop and saw the herd. They were just ahead, standing quietly, a few steers lifting their heads from skimpy grass to watch the approach of the horsemen. Wyman drew beside Ben to yell in glee.

"What a break! Man, are you lucky! They ran into another blind alley an' had to pull up."

IT WAS TRUE. Ahead of the herd there was a high cliff that blocked the entire pass, and Ben threw back his head to laugh. He yelled. "This is the best luck I've had since I hit this danged ridge country."

Half an hour later they were driving toward the peaks, back at their old game of testing this pass and that. But now they seemed to have better luck, and the few times they were forced to retrace their tracks it was only over short distances. Ben's luck seemed to have changed for the better, and the old hope came back to him as he made good time and the peaks came closer.

They drove hard all day. And an hour before sundown they passed from a narrow passage to a clean wide trail which looked like the original one. Certainly it curved away to a point between the peaks, like a trail that knew where it was headed. Wyman whooped.

"Now we're plumb right, Texan. Now it'll be plain treckin' all the way to your danged Valley o' Grass."

"Providin' the coyotes from White Ridge don't catch up with us," Ben said. "Which they surely will."

They did, just at sundown. At least they caught up to within shooting range. There was a spurt of dust at the buckskin's feet, and a whipping report that echoed across distance. Seth Wyman yelled excitedly.

"Long range shootin', from that ridge away on the right. I saw a puff of smoke—there's another!"

The bullet whined overhead before its report cracked, and that was long range shooting indeed. Ben jerked his forty-five out and began shooting skyward.

"What the hell...are you loco?" Seth yelled.

"No...but this time I'll do my own stampedin'," Ben answered. "There's jus' two ways the herd can run, an' I want 'em to run north. Those coyotes are shootin' at the cows, don't you see?"

Even as he spoke, a steer dropped and lay still. With a whoop of rage, Seth jerked his own six-gun from his belt and joined Ben in raising a ruckus. Together they screamed and fired, their horses dancing, while shots from the distant ridge still spattered the trail.

The cattle milled in confusion for a few moments, then thundered away uptrail. Ben and his friend ate the dust, and there was a lull in the shooting from the ridge because in the dust-cloud they had become invisible. Swiftly Ben took advantage of the chance that offered. Motioning to Wyman, he galloped north, still in the thick of the trail-dust from galloping beef, the two men choking and blinded.

But only for a few moments. Then Ben led the way behind a ridge at the left of the trail, and there they reined back. Gouging dust from his eyes, Ben managed a grin. He said, "The dust hit our movement. Likely they'll figure that we followed the stampede an' they'll leave their ridge to chase us. We'll kinda wait flat at the top of the ridge here, an' wait for 'em, huh?"

"A good plan," Seth said, "supposin' I can clean the dust outa my eyes to see 'em when they get here. What

d'we do now...go to the top o' the ridge?"

"That's right," Ben said, and they slid from their saddles. Then they took Winchesters from saddle-holsters and climbed the slope. Minutes later they were flat on the ridge-top, scanning the distance.

THERE WAS no sign of their enemies, though both knew that it didn't mean a thing. The gang could be headed for them, but between lower ridges at the moment. Alertly watching, Wyman said, "What 'bout the herd? Ain't you worried 'bout 'em?"

"No, Seth, I ain't. They're runnin' north, an' the trail passes plumb between the twin peaks. It must, I reckon. An' a little way beyond the peaks is the Valley of Grass, accordin' to that fat barkeep. So even if the cattle keep runnin' all night, they'll stop when they reach the valley. They've been strugglin' along on hay an' poor grass. They sure ain't gonna pass up a valleyful of rich, green grass."

"Reckon you're right," Wyman said, and suddenly grinned. "Seems to be a kinda habit with you, bein' right."

"Mebbe," Ben said, then tensed. "Here they come, ridin' hell for leather. Two, three...yeh, that's all. Three of 'em. Cline Mason an' the Gaynor brothers, I guess."

The riders were hurtling their mounts down a last long slope to the trail, drawing closer to the ambush every moment. Seth Wyman lifted his rifle eagerly, a hard grin on his face.

"I'll take the hombre on the big black, the one that's leadin'." he said, and before Ben could stop him he fired.

It was the wrong time to shoot but it was done now and Ben joined in the ruckus. He'd wanted the enemy right on the open trail below, sitting shots without cover, but Wyman in his eagerness had spoiled things.

Now the three enemy riders had hauled back and were plunging their mounts for the cover of sage and boulders east of the trail. They made difficult targets, though the range wasn't long. One man threw a quick shot from the saddle as he dived for cover, the slug gouging dust from beside Ben's elbow. Next moment, the riders were among reasonable cover and the two-way rumpus raged.

"Damn me for a doggoned fool!" Seth Wyman swore, seeing his mistake now. "I shoulda waited till they was past all cover an' on the open trail below."

Ben grinned but said nothing. Bullets spurted the dust around them as he and Seth traded shots with the men on the other slope. Seth said, "Danged if I know what we're shootin' at. Can't see enough o' them coyotes to aim at."

"They're havin' the same trouble," Ben said. "We're high an' flat on the ground, an' unless they're mighty good shots they ain't gonna hurt us. It's a kinda deadlock, at the moment. The real fun won't start until it's dark, I guess."

With both sides realising the position, the shooting slackened, though Seth was ever on the alert for anybody foolish enough to show a piece of himself above the boulders.

Ben Royle filled in his time differently, studying the layout of slopes and ridges so that he wouldn't be baffled when the after-dark juggling of positions began. He quickly decided that a quick retreat to the north would be the best strategy. Two men could be out-positioned by three, especially in the dark. And though Seth would have been the last to complain, Ben knew that the bad arm was troubling him and that he wasn't in the best condition for a night-long battle of nerves.

He said to Wyman, "We likely surprised 'em by waitin' to fight when they'd figured that we'd run. Now we'll fool 'em the other way—soon as it's dark we'll get to blazes outa here

an' leave 'em to surround an empty ridge." He suddenly grinned. "With a bit o' luck, they might even start shootin' at each other in the dark."

"Whatever you say," Seth shrugged. Me, I'd jus' as soon shoot it out with 'em."

But Ben sensed that the miner was secretly relieved, and said no more. Just to keep the waiting enemy on their toes, he sent an occasional bullet to spatter the boulders.

BUT BEFORE it could be put into effect a new factor appeared. The heavy cloud which had haunted the twin peaks for so long, now spread over the sky again and began to drip rain. While the dusk still lingered. the rain became a steady drizzle that slowly soaked the two men on the open ridge. The ones below, Ben figured, would enjoy a certain amount of shelter from the boulders.

"This'll lay the dust," Seth said cheerfully. "I reckon—" He stopped, staring below with eyes squinted against the gloom. "Say, look at that!"

Ben was already looking. One of the party below had left the boulders. He was on a horse and heeling it back up the slope to the east. Seth raised himself a little on the ridge and aimed his rifle.

The shot boomed in the dusk, but vision was difficult and the hombre's horse was sliding and plunging on the rain-greased slope. A moment later Ben and Wyman were flat on the ridge while the men remaining below replied with angry shots. When the shooting stopped the horseman had disappeared in the gloom, headed back from where he and his friends had come.

"Wal, what d'you make of that?" Ben frowned.

"He's gone back to town for mackintoshes," Seth grinned.

"He's gone back to the far ridge, the one from where they shot at us first," Ben said. "I sure wish I knew why."

"Mebbe they're more men back there," Seth said, seriously now. "Might be they're bringin' in reinforcements to surround this ridge after dark. You wanta know somethin', Texan? I'm beginning to think that your retreating plan is a good one."

"An' I figure it's about dark enough to start on it," Ben said. "Let's snake back from the ridge-top an' make for our hosses."

A few moments later they were half-sliding, half-screaming down the blind side of the ridge. The rain was still drizzling strongly, a fine, wetting rain which had quickly made mud of the loose dust underfoot. Ben and Wyman were soaked, their riding-boots caked with mud, by the time they reached the horses. Pausing only to scrape slush from heels, they swung to the wet saddles and quietly walked the animals northward.

The cushion of mud underfoot helped them to move quietly. It was now almost dark, but they could still see the bulk of the ridge at their right, black against the cloudy sky. The ridge seemed to continue north for a long way. But it had to peter out somewhere, and then the two riders would swing back to the main trail and go in pursuit of the cattle.

With the night black all around them, the rain fell harder. The cold seeped into their bodies, water from floppy hats cascaded down their faces, and they could no longer see the ridge at the right.

With a kind of happy despair, Seth Wyman said, "An' I left a comfortable miner's hut for this!"

"Bear up," Ben cracked back. "This kinda life'll make a man of you."

Just the same, he was worried about the redhead. It wasn't good for a wounded man to be subjected to cold and rain, and he silently cursed the weather. But the rain continued, and in the wet darkness it became difficult to be sure of direction.

It was a nightmare ride, but a long hour later they suddenly found them-

selves on the main trail. Ben's policy of keeping the lower slope of the ridge underfoot had paid off, swinging the party to the right as the ridge faded out. And at the same time the rain eased off.

Soon the rain had stopped altogether, and against a lightened sky they saw the dark shapes of twin peaks ahead, mighty peaks now, and the open wideness of the trail which aimed between them.

Along the open trail they made better time, heeling the horses for speed. Ben wondered what was going on back at the ridge, and knew that the gang would sooner or later realise that their intended victims had flown. And he kept thinking of that rider who'd returned to the far ridge. Why had he gone back? To fetch more men, as Wyman had suggested?

AT THE END of another hour they had put a lot of distance behind, and it was then that Seth yelled, "Hey, Ben, have you noticed? We're kickin' dust again. Look!"

He was right. Dust was billowing behind the loping horses, hovering whitely in the night. Ben said. "That means it hasn't rained here, huh? Looks like this's where we get our coffee."

They pulled off the trail and went over a rocky ledge. Soon they found a spot that was hidden from the trail, and there they opened pack-rolls to dry, and gathered wood for a small fire. In the dark they could see no stream around, but there was enough water in their canteens for coffee. Half an hour later they left warm and cheerful.

"With the herd off our hands an' bein' well hid here, we'll skip the sentry work," Ben said. "Those coyotes are a long way behind, anyways. An' we sure need the sleep."

They slept well, despite the dampness of blankets, and the sun was slanting its rays into the rocky nook by the time they awoke. They breakfasted hurriedly, then Ben climbed a high ridge to scan the distant backtrail.

From that high point he could see a lot of territory. The wide trail climbed steadily from a long way south, sometimes curving out of sight behind rises but always appearing again until, finally, it lost itself in the misty distance. And though Ben watched for a long time, there was no sign of pursuit

Ben was about to return to Seth and the horses when, away to the south-east, he spotted a great haze of dust that hovered above the ridges. He stared, frowning. At first he thought it was a dust-storm. Then he decided that it was too self-contained for one. He had seen dust-storms that approached at a fast rate and seemed to spread across the face of the earth, but the dust he watched now was confined to one area, and if moving at all, only slowly.

It was a long way off, he decided. And as he watched and wondered, the truth seeped into him. Such dust could be raised by riders—but it sure would need to be an army of riders. That left just one answer.

"Hey, Texan," Seth yelled from below. "How much longer're you gonna stay perched up there? What's so interesting?"

Ben climbed down the ridge and smiled at the waiting redhead. He said, "The plot thickens, as those actor hombres say. An' now I'm beginnin' to understand a lotta things."

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A MINUTE later Ben and Wyman were in the saddles and headed north along the wide trail, following the plain tracks of the little herd that had passed hours earlier. Seth looked at the Texan, his smile eager.

"So you understand a lotta things huh? Such as?"

"Wal, first of all," Ben said, "back there to the south-east there's a dust-haze so wide an' slowly movin' that it can only mean beef on the hoof. A danged big herd, Seth, an' bein' drove in this direction."

"Along the trail, d'you mean?" Seth cried.

"Not along this trail. Must be another way into the Valley o' Grass, after all. That's where the big herd is headed, sure."

"I guess you're right."

Ben smiled grimly and said, "I ain't guessin'. I'm kinda putting two and two together an' gettin' reasonable answers."

"Like four, mebbe?"

"Like four, Seth. Now I know why Lou Condo hired Cline Mason to kill me an' scatter my herd. I had a day or so start in a race for the Valley, an' he was aimin' to hamper me. Or rub me out altogether. Like we figured earlier, he wants the Valley o' Grass for himself. But though he's been in White Ridge for years, it's only kinda recent that he or his stooges have discovered the Valley. For a long time it was jus' a travellers' tale, nobody knowin' whether it really existed. I was kinda doubtful an' worried myself, when I drove my herd up here. But Condo discovered it at last, an' made arrangements for a herd to be bunked down there so's he could claim the valley."

"Then," Wyman said, "while the arrangements were under way, along comes a Texan with his own little herd?"

"That's right. At first Condo thought I wanted to sell the lot for beef, an' was quite happy. Sure, he'd put the Gaynor brothers at the Long Knife bridge to stop any beef but his own comin' into the Ridges, but so long as I wanted to sell mine for meat he didn't mind! But when he found that I was aiming to push on, he sure knew that I was looking for the Valley."

"I see what you mean. His herd was on the way, but they hadn't reached the Ridges yet. Yours had. So he calls in his gunslingers to stop you."

"That's the way it looks," the Texan said. "An' the herd he's got is a big one, headin' in this direction along another route. Not that it'll do Condo any good, I reckon. My cows are likely in the Valley by now, which makes it my valley."

"Accordin' to Gov'ment rules, sure," Seth said, scratching his head. "But then, accordin' to Gov'ment rules you can't have other people shot an' their herds stampeded. But that don't stop Condo from doin' jus' that. Texan, you've got a hell of a fight on your hands, no matter whether you're first into the Valley or not. It ain't what happens that counts. It's what Washington's told that matters."

"You're plumb right," Ben said. "But if I'm first into the Valley I'm gonna fight like hell to stay there. Mebbe I'll be outnumbered, but... wal, I've gotten outa tight spots before. I'll figure some way out."

"We'll figure a way out."

ALL DAY long they rode northward. The last miles, long stretch of trail, where it lay between the peaks, was bounded by steep walls of rock at each side. Where earlier it had simply been a clear way between ridges and boulders, now it was a deep channel in which travel was possible in only two directions, north and south.

Clouds still clung to the tips of the peaks, but overhead the sky was a blue mass from which the sun beat strongly. Riding deep along the channel-like trail, the two men sweated. And the peaks that towered high beyond each channel-wall seemed to move past so very slowly, distance and height creating an illusion that, no matter how long they rode, the men would never get any further north.

But they did, of course. A lot of miles were left behind, with still the trail bounded by high walls and cliffs, but by late in the afternoon the bulk of the twin peaks were slightly behind.

"We're through," Ben grinned, mopping sweat from his face. "I guess the Valley o' Grass can't be much further. Likely we'll reach it in the mornin', huh?"

"Sure hope so," Wyman said. "Meantime, we're outa water, and there don't seem to be any a r o u n d. D'you reckon we'll have to camp dry, right here on the trail?"

"Don't know," Ben said. He saw that the redhead was a little pale and drawn, and guessed at a sick man's need for water behind the casual question.

"Must be a break somewhere along these danged walls," Ben said, looking at the cliffs that hemmed them in. "Likely there're streams outside if only we could get to 'em."

They kept a sharp lookout, but it was sundown before any kind of break appeared. Then it wasn't much more than a slanting crack, in the east wall, very narrow and too steep for a horse to manage. But Ben figured that a man could make the climb and he reined back and slid from the saddle.

Taking the two saddle-canteens, he went to the wall and started up the slanting crevice. Some of it was tough going, but his young muscles were equal to it. In twenty minutes he was at the top of the high wall, and waved in triumph to Seth Wyman.

From the top he could see far down the trail, and almost the first thing he saw was trail-dust, in a small cloud and moving slowly, maybe twelve miles back. The light was good and visibility clear, and soon Ben was able to make out four riders. Four!

He did some hard thinking. The figures were too far away to be recognised, but he guessed that they were the gang with whom he and Seth had been tangling. There had been only three in the last rifle-ruckus, but one had retraced his tracks. Had he gone back for the fourth? If so, why? Why had the fourth member of the party remained behind that far ridge last night? Ben could find no answer.

And as he watched he saw that the party, tiny specks in the distance, were leaving the trail. They could do it, not yet having reached the walled-in section. Ben guessed that they were striking camp for the night.

THE NEXT thing Ben saw was that big haze of dust to the south-east. Now it was much closer, and certainly the dust of a driving herd. He still couldn't see the cattle, but ahead of where the dust hovered he saw a wide trail, almost as wide as the one he and Wyman were travelling. It snaked forward, between ridges and lightly timbered valleys, passed Ben's position only a mile to the east, and dipped out of sight along a canyon.

Ben went looking for water, a new thought troubling him. Soon he found a fresh stream that bubbled from the slopes of the east peak, and he filled the canteens. Half an hour later he was with Seth once more, and they began making rough camp on the trail.

"The gang are followin' behind," Ben said, frowning. "There're four of 'em now. I sure would like to know who the fourth hombre is. I figure that the other three are Mason an' the Gaynor brothers."

"Mebbe it's Lou Condo."

"Reckon not. If Lou's out on the job at all, he'll be with his herd. The herd's purty close to us now. You know what, Seth? Seems like the trail the herd is usin' swings plumb into this one, not too far ahead. It bears what with the gang o' four trailin' us behind, an' that enemy herd an' its drivers closin' in at the side, looks like we're gonna be kinda busy in the next day or two."

That night, seeing that they were

right on the open trail, they took it in turn to stay awake and watch.

But nothing happened. And next morning, with Seth Wyman looking more like his old self at last, the two men were up and eating before sunrise. Ben wanted to get away to an early start, figuring to reach the Valley o' Grass as soon as possible.

Just the same, he took time out to climb the wall again and scan the distance. The gang backtrail were already moving, he saw. The herd hadn't started yet, for there was no dust. He wondered about the herd, anxious to reach the expected fork in the trail before the cattle.

Ben and Wyman rode north again, and at a good speed. The ride continued between those high walls, but was without incident until the fork appeared. It was midmorning then. The fork was at the east side, another channelled trail joining the main one as Ben had expected.

"And the herd are headed up that fork," he said grimly. "They'll be along purty soon I reckon." He looked ahead and noted how the country seemed to flatten out, with fewer ridges and a lot more scrub and timber. He said, "The Valley o' Grass ain't far off now, pard. Neither is the fight of our lives...unless I can think o' somethin'..."

Then he did think of something. Suddenly he slapped a hand to his lean thigh, and looked at Wyman with a face that was hard and determined. "Say! Let's rein back for awhile. I wanta talk."

Seth reined back, and said, "I'm listenin', Texan."

"Let's kinda sum up our chances in a fight," Ben said. "There's jus' you an' me...an' your bad arm ain't gonna help you to shoot straight. Against us there'll be the four who're trailin' us, an' the men who're drivin' the herd along the fork. Another four, mebbe, or more. That ain't so good, huh?"

"Two against eight ain't good in any language."

"All right. So we've gotta resort to cunning, I reckon. And seein' that the gang've been so dead set on killin' us, I don't aim to play any fairer than I have to. Seth, we ain't goin' any further. We're waitin' right here."

"Are we, Texan. Why?"

"Wal, first I don't want the herd to reach the Valley o' Grass. Second, I don't wanta have to fight against odds. So we'll wait here an' kinda kill two birds with one stone, as the sayin' goes. I figure that the herd'll reach the fork before the gang who're trailin' us. Wal, we'll take up positions high somewhere handy, an' turn on hell with our Winchesters when the herd arrives. We'll stampede 'em down the main trail, before the danged trail-drivers know what's hit them. That way, we'll turn Condo's beef back from the Valley an' destroy Mason's gang at the same time. They'll be in the walled part o' the main trail by then, an' there'll be no escape. The big herd'll run smack into 'em, round one o' those curves, an' trample 'em to pulp. An' all we'll have to worry about is the trail-drivers, who'll be on the open fork an' sittin' shots for us...unless we can persuade 'em to surrender."

Seth Wyman's eyes were lit with excitement. He said, "That's the plan of a desperate man, but I'm all for it. Let's find a place on these slopes where we can shoot anythin' in sight."

They loped off the trail and studied the surroundings. At each side of where the trails met, the land sloped in broken layers that overlooked the junction. Ben picked his spots.

He said, "I'll wait up there, at that side..." He pointed to a rock shelf fifty feet above the main trail and a little beyond the junction. He directed Seth to a similar position on the west side of the trail.

"It'll depend on good timin'," he warned the redhead. "I'll wave my neckerchief when it's time to start shootin'. I'm gonna wait until the biggest part o' the herd have rounded from the fork into the main trail. The drivers'll still be in the fork, behind the herd. When we turn the steers back with shots an' yells, their own drivers'll be blockin' the fork, so they'll jus' kinda naturally run south down the main trail."

"Bringin' death to Cline Mason an' his coyotes. I sure hope it works, Texan. One thing I promise you. I won't spoil this rumpus by shootin' too soon. I'll wait for your signal."

"Let's go," Ben said.

THEY PARTED, loping their mounts up the broken slopes that sided the fork. Ben left his mount hitched to a tree, and stationed himself on the shelf. A moment later, Seth Wyman was waving from a similar position opposite.

It was a long wait, with a thousand doubts plaguing Ben Royle. This thing he proposed to do could easily go wrong, and failure could mean death for himself and for his friend. But he steeled himself for action, determined to succeed. In the course of the next hour his future would hang in the balance. And it was a warm future in which Dianne Sanderson would figure largely. He was determined to live it.

And this was the best course of action possible, he thought. Better to attack and win by surprise, then wait for a long-odds fight which had to come sooner or later. He rolled a smoke and soothed himself with its tangy fragrance. He looked across to the opposite slope and saw that Wyman was doing the same.

There was a faint, distant rumble on the morning air. But not too distant. To an old cowhand like Ben the sound was familiar. Beef on the hoof.

He looked along the curving fork and saw the dust haze, floating above ridges. The bellows of cattle were plainly heard now. Soon he could also hear the soft, rumbling thunder of hoofs, hundreds of plodding hoofs hitting a dusty trail in a kind of whispering chorus. It was a sound he had listened to many times, but never with so much tingling excitement.

Long minutes later the cattle came in view. They filled the wide trail, side to side, bobbing head to plodding rump. It was a moving mass of hide and horns, swelling into the trail from round the bend bobbing leisurely toward the fork.

Ben levered a bullet into his barrel, and waited. Minutes later he saw that the entire herd, perhaps five hundred strong, were now in sight. Three riders trailed them, and even at the distance he recognized the lean figure of Lou Condo. He had met Condo only once, but well remembered the neat cut of him, the set of his sleek head and sloping shoulders.

Ben felt a deep hatred for the man. but reminded himself that his feeling was based on mere theory, and until he knew for certain that Condo had been the one who'd ordered his death, he wouldn't kill Condo. It was one of those cases where theory wasn't good enough. You had to know.

Then he brought his mind back to the task at hand, and watched the herd passing below. Now the leaders were out of the fork and on the main trail north. They plodded further ahead, the mob following. They were bunched tightly, and soon the biggest part of the herd was on the main trail. And as the three riders who tailed the herd drew near to the fork, Ben flashed his colored neckerchief.

Then there was crackling thunder down the slopes, and the whine of bullets, and crazy yells and screams from Ben and Wyman. Thoroughly ruthless, Ben shot two of the leading steers, then spattered the dust among others

as fast as he could pump lead to his barrel and pull the trigger. In a surprisingly short time the steers were milling and bellowing stupidly, while Condo and his men foolishly added to the sound and fury by shooting wildly at Ben and Wyman.

Six-gun bullets buzzed close, but Ben ignored the danger to concentrate on turning the herd. Seth was backing up well, and a furious volley of shots split the air and echoed around, throwing dust in savage spurts to terrify the steers. They plunged about, colliding and clashing horns, then ran from the barrier of bullets. And because the three men who blocked the fork were adding to the gunfire, the herd kept running south, along the main trail.

Soon they were gone, leaving only a rising cloud of dust, while Condo and his riders threw raging lead at the tiny targets formed by Ben and Wyman as they lay flat on their shelves.

"Throw up your hands," Ben yelled, "an' drop your guns, or we'll cut you down pronto."

The bluff didn't work. The three men leaped from saddles and ran for the broken slopes, throwing wild shots as they sought cover. And at that moment Ben looked across at Wyman—and saw a horseman bearing down on him from behind.

"Look out!" Ben yelled. But Wyman turned, jumped to his feet, and ran back from his ledge to greet the rider. The rider had come over a ridge to the west, and Ben had never seen him before.

But it looked as if Seth knew him and was friendly. The redhead spoke with the man, then yelled urgently to Ben.

"Hey, Texan! This here's Dave Jones. Been lookin' all over for us. Cline Mason outsmarted him, an' kidnapped the Sanderson gal!"

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BEN RAN back to where his horse was hitched, leaped to the saddle and hurtled down the slopes to the fork. A volley of six-gun slugs burned the air as Condo and his men from the cover of boulders fired at him. Ben felt the kicking impact of lead against his gun-holster, while another shot scorched the hair of his neck. But his thoughts were for nothing but Diane Sanderson's danger, and he didn't bother to reply to the shooting.

He flogged his buckskin along the fork, then swung off it to climb the west slopes. By then he was out of gun range, leaving Wyman to deal with Condo and his men. If he spared Seth a thought at all, it was that his friend would help him shoot it out.

But mostly his thoughts were of Diane, and the unlucky turn of events that had put her in such terrible danger. That fool Jones, whom Wyman had trusted to look after the girl. He'd failed. Mason had kidnapped her.

Likely he'd known who she was from the moment he'd hit White Ridge. "He stares at me a lot," Diane had said. Yes, he'd known that she was the girl who'd accused him of murder in San Jose, and he hadn't figured to let her run around loose while he was engaged in a similar deal.

So, before setting out to trail Ben, he had swooped on her. And a lot of puzzling things were clear enough now, the answers falling in place in Ben's troubled brain. He thought of the rifle ruckus, and that gang member who'd gone back to the far ridge.

He had gone back to get Diane, of course. They had left her behind the far ridge when they'd sent out to chase Ben and Wyman. Just as they had left her with the fourth member of the gang back at the campfire, the night of the raid when Kit Ferris had been killed. Probably they kept her roped up. Ferris' death had reduced their masculine number to three, but Diane had been the puzzling fourth "hombre" in the party that Ben had seen backtrail yesterday.

But these thoughts flitted swiftly and unimportantly through Ben's brain as he raced his horse wildly over the broken country. Keeping a course parallel to the walled-in main trail that dropped southward. The important thing now was that somewhere along that trail Diane was riding with her captors, trapped between those sheer walls, while death in the shape of the stampeding herd ran headlong to meet her.

And when Ben thought of how the stampede had been set in motion deliberately, by himself, he went sick with despair. If she died, he would never forgive himself. Damn it, he should never have left her to the danger which had so obviously lurked in White Ridge.

The buckskin had been one of the fastest mounts in the Pecos Basin, and now Ben called for everything it had. The animal responded gamely, and though it was rough and broken country the general slope was downhill, and Ben began to hope against hope that the impossible might be managed. Ahead and to his right, the dust haze of the running herd floated above the trail wall. But the herd itself was still far ahead.

Ben had one big advantage. His horse could run fairly straight, swinging to avoid sage and rocks but keeping a true course, while the deep trail at his right curved about a lot. By cutting across in a straight line where the curves occurred, Ben made some big gains on the running herd.

Soon he was level with the dust-haze where it rose above the trail, but the cattle were still a little way ahead. Dust always billowed out behind a running herd and floated upward in the wake. Still, they weren't too far ahead. Above the clatter of his buckskin's hoofs he heard the bellowing of cows, and sometimes caught the trembling thunder of their hoofs.

Then, almost before he realized it, the Texan ran headlong into trouble. He topped a slight rise and headed crazily down a slope, and saw a yawning gap in the ground. The gap was hurtling towards him, a wide split in the earth, with empty space dropping away in shadow.

He had a split second to decide what to do. To pull up and look for a way round the hazard would be to lose all hope of reaching Diane before the herd. To risk a jump could mean death. Without a second thought he thrashed the scared horse and put him fast down the slope. The gap came close. It seemed to leap at the chance to swallow a victim. The buckskin's forelegs went high and his muscular hind-quarters heaved.

There was a breathless moment as the horse hovered in space, and Ben glimpsed a shining ribbon of water at the bottom of the gorge five hundred feet below. Then the buckskin scrabbled to a skidding, desperate landing on the far bank, dirt and rocks falling into space as the edge crumbled. Then the buckskin stumbled forward and away and Ben felt the sweat go cold on his face.

But now there wasn't much time. He swung the racing horse dangerously close to the rugged edge of the trail wall, and saw that he'd passed the running cattle. He prayed that Mason's party might not appear yet, while he was helpless to help Diane.

Now as he raced southward he saw

that the wall of the trail was lower, maybe thirty feet high where, further north, it had been fifty. But still it was too sheer-falling for a horse to negotiate, and Ben grappled with the problem of how to get down, how to be of any help now that he was here.

He had raced to a fair lead on the thundering herd when at last, he saw four riders coming along the trail-bed. In a moment he saw that one was a woman, and as he raced to close the distance he saw that she was roped into her saddle, legs tied to stirrups, wrists bound to the saddlehorn.

HE'D PLAYED with a wild idea of lassoing her and lifting her from her mount, hauling her up the trail wall to safety, but now it was out of the question. Like flashes of lightning the thoughts came and went, and a new decision was made as Ben skidded his sweating buckskin to a halt and leaped from the saddle on the very edge of the wall. Next moment he snatched the lasso from his saddlehorn, swiftly anchored it round a jutting rock, and began lowering himself to the trail as the party below drew near.

They saw him of course. Ben heard a lazy-toned voice cry, "Look! It's that danged Texan..." and recognised George Gaynor. Dangling in space at the cliff wall, hands burning on the thin, swinging rope, he heard Diane's scream mixed with the crash of six-guns as bullets chipped rock and dust inches from his face.

Waiting for the stab of a slug into his body, he lowered himself quickly. The bullets followed him down, and one burned a hot crease in the calf of his leg. A moment later Ben was on the trail, running to meet the party, his forty-five hauled from its holster as he yelled, "Pull up! Go back! It's a stampede!"

At that moment he heard the rumble of thunder behind, and knew that the gang had heard it also. They stopped shooting, hauling back on the range-bred horses that recognised the sound and plunged madly. For a moment there was fear and confusion, and Ben Royle took advantage of it. Still running toward the party, he fired his gun and saw a man in a wide yellow hat, clutch a hand at his chest and fall from the saddle of a big black horse.

Cline Mason's life had ended. Almost before he'd stopped falling, Ben was near enough to leap for the empty saddle. George Gaynor swore from the back of his prancing horse and threw a shot that burned another groove across Ben's shoulder, but Kel Gaynor was already low in the saddle and headed swiftly south away from the menacing herd.

A moment later George forgot his enmity and fled also. Ben saw the first steers rounding a bend. Grabbing the reins of Diane's mount, he heeled his black horse southward.

But one horse trailing another was an awkward business, and didn't go to make the best speed. Ben looked back and saw that the wild-eyed steers were gaining. Desperately he groped for his jack-knife, clicked it open. He swung his mount close to the captive girl's, leaned over and slashed at the ropes which held her wrists to the saddlehorn.

They didn't speak. In the thunder of hoofs and the frightening bellows they wouldn't have heard each other anyway. At last the ropes parted and Diane's reddened wrists were free. Ben could do nothing about her legs. He tossed her the reins and she took them eagerly, hunching in the saddle to ride as fast as she knew how.

And she sure knew how. Her days on her uncle's Long Y were paying off, as she raced her mount pace for pace with Ben's, her matted hair flying in the wind. Ben noted the rumpled untidiness of her dress, the dust-stained face, the ropemarks on legs

and arms, and a black rage welled up in him.

IT WAS A strange race for life; captive, captors and captors' enemy forgetting their differences as they rode hard to stay from under the thundering herd. George and Kel Gaynor were well ahead, Ben and the girl having lost some ground while rope-slashing. Ben looked back and saw that the steers were still too close to be comfortable, heavy hoofs pounding the trail forty yards behind.

He heeled his black for more speed, and swung close to slap at Diane's mount, but both were hurtling at the limit. Desperately Ben groped for a way out.

The idea came when he noticed one big steer which had run ahead of its fellows. It was pounding the middle of the trail, and Ben drew his gun to take deliberate aim. He fired. He saw the red hole appear between the curled horns. The steer pounded on for a moment, then pitched to the ground and rolled violently, a mess of hoofs, horns and flying dust.

It wasn't a great success. A few of the following steers crashed and fell, but the rest swerved neatly to either side. Still, it was a race for life—then Ben's troubles were doubled as a shot burned the air close to him and Diane cried in alarm.

George Gaynor was shooting back at him. The short gunman still sported a bandaged hand, which likely spoiled his shooting. Another slug chipped Ben's hat, and swiftly he jerked out his forty-five. His shot was hurried, but lucky. It missed George Gaynor —and bored his brother Kel who'd been riding a few yards ahead.

Kel threw up despairing hands and fell from the saddle. As Ben and the white-faced girl raced past, Kel was still rolling. A second later Ben thought he heard something that shrilled above the thunder of the herd, but couldn't be sure. Then he saw that the trail walls were falling away at last, and he exulted.

Now they were back where the rifle ruckus had taken place. Ben recognised it ahead, the ridge from where he and Seth Wyman had fired. Seth had fired too early, and the gang had escaped the death Ben had planned. Just as well Ben thought now. All the time Diane had been behind the far ridge, and most likely tied up, and if her captors had died she would have been left there to starve.

It was a surprise to find himself so far backtrail already. Ben had been confused and worried, hadn't figured that ground which, in an uphill direction, had taken almost a day to cover, could be retraced at a breakneck speed downhill in a few hours. And now as the trail walls fell away, George Gaynor quickly took advantage and swung away to the slopes.

Ben and Diane followed. When they were well off the trail they reined back and watched the herd rumble past. Ben gasped for talking-breath, then said, "Them Condo steers ain't gonna stop till they reach Long Knife Canyon...an' they ain't gonna stop to pay toll, either."

"Ben..." the girl was gasping. "Oh, Ben, if you hadn't come along..."

"I was kinda obliged to," he said, "seein' that I started the herd runnin'. That was before I knew that you were with Mason, o' course."

"That beast!" she flashed. "He knew I was Diane Sanderson, after all. Said...said that he was going to take me to his cabin in Montana, after this job was finished. You killed him, Ben. I'm glad—"

A six-gun shot crashed among the ridges, the bullet thudding into the black horse beneath Ben Royle. The big beast trembled, and his knees bent. Diane screamed. Ben slid from the saddle and got clear before the horse hit the ground.

"Friend George," he yelled, "out to avenge his brother—"

Another shot spurted the dust at Ben's feet. Diane cried, "Up on that rock...there he is, Ben."

A third shot thundered, and there was a gasp from the girl. Dazedly Ben turned and saw blood streaming from her arm. Then in a blind rage he bellowed crazily and began scrambling up the rocky outcrop from where George was shooting.

SHOTS CAME in quick succession, but as Ben climbed swiftly and unflinchingly he seemed immune to hot lead. His rage at what he'd just seen consumed him completely, and two more bullet-burns across his stumbling body didn't bother him at all.

Then there was a lull, and he knew that George had emptied his gun. With a roar of anger mixed with triumph Ben reached the top of the outcrop. George Gaynor was squatted on it, feverishly trying to reload. He was just snapping the gun shut when Ben shot his bandaged arm.

Gaynor screamed. He dropped the gun, making a useless attempt to stop it as it slid over the edge of the rock and fell maybe thirty feet to the ground. Ben fired another shot that smashed Gaynor's other arm.

The hombre rolled on his back, his arms useless. He began to sob curses at Ben. Ben kicked him hard in the body, the great rage still driving him. He roared, "You shot the gal, you stinkin' polecat. By hell, Gaynor, you'll suffer for that. If there was a damned ant-heap around here I'd smash your legs an' leave you on it."

"Blast you!" George screamed. "You killed Kel—"

"Like I'm gonna kill you," Ben cried. Then he sheathed his gun, walked to the fallen man, and began to kick him toward the edge of the rocky peak.

Under the kicking, prodding boots George rolled and squirmed, blood streaming from his flopping arms.

"No...no, don't, Royle. I don't wanta die. Look...I'll talk. I'll squeal...tell you the whole set-up."

"I know the set-up," Ben growled. "I know that Condo wanted me outa the way so that he could grab the Valley o' Grass. I know a lotta things, George, but none so certain as that you're goin' over the edge of this rock."

"No, blast you...don't..."

The words choked off as Ben, with a final kick, sent the gunman over the edge. There was a horrible scream of terror that ended with a thump. Ben looked down and saw the faintly squirming body sprawled below.

He scrambled down the peak and went back to Diane Sanderson. She hadn't fainted. She was bent over, vainly trying to undo the knots of the ropes that bound her legs to the stirrups. Ben slashed her free, and she slid from the saddle into his arms.

"It's all right," she said, smiling at the concern in his eyes. "It's only a crease on my arm, nothing serious. You've collected some creases yourself...oh, Ben, you're not hurt, are you?"

"I'm fine," he said softly, holding her to him. "I feel great. Now let's look at that arm."

He bound her wound and ignored the pain of his own scattered ones. He found George Gaynor's horse and

mounted it, and together they headed north along the trail. Diane told him the details of the kidnapping, of how Cline Mason and the Gaynor brothers had broken in at the rear of the cafe and taken her, tied and gagged, from her room.

It was a long ride back up the sloping northward trail, with Ben now worried about Seth Wyman. He'd hated to run out on Seth, but there'd been no time for anything else. Anxiously he wondered whether Seth's friend Dave Jones was any better at gunfighting than he was at guarding girls.

For hours the horses plodded, in the sunbaked channel of the trail. The sun began to lower in the sky. Then Ben Royle saw a dustcloud rising from beyond a bend in the trail, and tensed.

"Could be more enemies comin' down the trail," he said, easing the gun in his holster.

"I'm sorry for them," Diane breathed, looking sideways at him with shining eyes. "After what I've seen you do to your enemies, I'm right sorry for those ahead."

Ben was watching the bend in the trail. Then two horsemen came into view. The horses were loping, but at sight of Ben and Diane the riders reined back and plunged for six-guns.

But the guns didn't leave the holsters.

"Ben...you crazy Texan!" Seth Wyman yelled. "You made it! You saved her! How in hell—" Then he looked sheepishly at Diane "I'm sorry, mam."

"It's all right!" she laughed gaily. "Everything's all right!"

"But how did you get on?" Ben cried riding forward to grip his friend's arm. "You did all right, it seems, huh?"

"Aw, me an' Dave managed all right," Seth said. "We shot it out. Lou Condo is dead. An' one of his riders is shot in the leg an' doesn't wanta play any more. The other fella hit the breeze."

"That's great," Ben said, and slowly realised just how great it was. Now all his troubles were over, provided his tiny herd had found the Valley o' Grass and were still there.

"And I've got news for you." Wyman said, sliding from his saddle. He slapped a great hand on the flank of the horse he'd been riding. "I left my hoss restin' back at the fork. This fella was Lou Condo's. Have a look."

He pointed to the brand, and Ben bent low from his saddle to look at it. It was the letter Y, rather tall and slim, an old brand over which the hair had grown but now bared by Seth's probing fingers.

Diane nudged her mount close to look also. She said, "The Long Y. That horse came from my poor uncle's ranch in the San Jose Valley."

"Sure," Ben said. "An' Condo was ridin' him. You know what it means, I guess. I had an idea 'bout it seein' that Cline Mason an' the Gaynor brothers were workin' for Condo same as they were workin' for that Rangeland Investment syndicate. Lou Condo was Rangeland Investments. He ordered Jed Sanderson's death, like he ordered mine. Likely some of that scattered herd o' his came from the Long Y, an' the same way."

Next morning they found the lush and beautiful Valley o' Grass, a great hollow of green range with a river down its middle, and spreading to every horizon. It was raining when they got there.

But who cared about the rain! This was the end of the trail. Ben Royle stood looking at his future, the dream running sweet in his mind. It was twice as sweet as it had ever been before, because now he shared it with the soaked, ragged little woman who stood beside him, one wet but warm little hand in his.

★

When he arrived in town, Buck found that his sidekick, Tortilla Joe was in jail, charged with murder. So, before word could get around as to who he was, it might be a good idea to become

BUCK McKEE--SIXGUN LAWYER

NOVELET by LEE FLOREN

WHEN BUCK McKEE reached Wad Matthews' farm, he found the homestead-shack a heap of cold ashes. Nearby was a small mound of fresh earth and he studied it with a scowl, thinking maybe a child was buried there. He turned his tired sorrel and rode toward Yellowstone City, but a mile down the road he talked with a farmer who had been loading his wagon with house-hold goods, apparently deserting his homestead.

The farmer held a shotgun in rough hands. "Be you a Circle Five rider?" he demanded hoarsely, "or is you an honest cowpuncher?"

McKee had never heard of the Circle Five outfit, for this was his first trip to this section of Montana Territory. He looked past the hard-bitten farmer at the man's wife—a buxom woman who was breathing hard from helping her husband load the heavy cookstove. Four kids stood and watched them.

McKee's long homely face showed what he hoped was an assuring smile, for he did not like the upthrust of the twelve gauge shotgun. "Reckon I must be a honest cowpoke," he said, grinning, " 'cause I don't even know what the Circle Five outfit is, or where it is located. I'm lookin' for a friend of mine name of Wadsworth Matthews."

"The Circle Five burned him down night afore last!" the woman exploded, voice heavy with venom. "Now he lays in bed in the hotel down in Yellowstone City, done shot through the gullet!"

The heavy-set farmer turned on his wife. "You hush your big mouth, Mabel! Nobody's got no proof the Circle Five riders did it! Thet ain't fittin' talk—all we aim to do is git outa this kentry, an' make wagon-tracks fast!"

"Afore they pay us a visit," the woman said angrily. "Damn ol' man Triggs an' thet murderin' foreman of his, Rocky Pincus!"

"What — what happened?" gasped Lucille Triggs.

"This man might be a Triggs spy, Mabel."

"If he is, gimme thet shotgun! I'll finish him like they finished poor Matthews' shepherd-dog!"

"I'm jes' a range-bum," Buck corrected hurriedly. He was sweating, and it was not all caused by the stifling noonday heat. Fear was with him, too, and fear framed his next sentence. "Did Matthews have a friend with him?"

The farmer said, "He sure did. Mexican feller what was vistin' him. Him an' Wad fit them night-riders good—kilt one of them, they did—but it weren't no 'count. They was outnumbered too bad!"

Now the fear was an icicle, despite the heat. "What happened to the Mexican?"

The woman cut in with, "He never even got wounded. But he's charged with murder, he is, an' it ain't fittin' an' fair."

"Where is he now?" Buck asked, the icicle melting.

"Down in Yellerstone City—in jail."

"Thank you." Buck lifted his hat and rode away.

An hour later he rode into Yellowstone City.

THE MAN'S shoulders were as wide as a neckyoke is long. He was over six feet, a bear of a man—yet Buck noticed he walked light in his polished Hyer boots. He had dull yellow eyes. "You're a stranger," he said, "an' what is your business?"

McKee planted one of his old boots on the bar-rail. "I'am a-wondering," he said, "what your name is, Mister?"

"Rocky Pincus, an' I ramrod the

Circle Five for Ol' Man Triggs."

Buck McKee summoned a smile. "Glad to meet you, Mr. Pincus. I'm Mr. Oliver Haven." He added, "Attorney at Law."

"Shyster lawyer, eh?"

McKee said nothing, sipping his cold beer. It washed the alkali dust from his gullet with cool refreshness. He was aware that the eyes of the saloon's other patrons were on them.

"Going to set up a office here, Haven?"

Buck McKee lowered his mug. "Might, if I like the town."

"We got one legal sharp here, name of Alexander Martin. He works for the Circle Five exclusively, and he is city attorney, too. Ain't no room maybe for another lawyer."

McKee looked out the flyspecked big front window onto Yellowstone City's main street. The idea of "city attorney" amused him. Some city, this—a few unpainted frame buildings, some with peeling paint, and dust a foot thick on the main drag. He brought his eyes back to his beer, keenly aware of the other's overwhelming presence. "Always room for another good lawyer," he murmured.

"So you figgers you're a *good* shyster, eh?"

Buck McKee said, "I want no trouble; I'm only looking for a place to practice my trade. I need a client."

A cowpuncher, at the giant's left, said, "Why not let him practice on the Mexican, Rocky? Yep, an' thet wounded farmer, too, what claims the Circle Five burned down his spread?"

Craftiness colored the faded eyes. "Hey, that might be a good idea."

Buck McKee killed his beer. "Did my hearing serve me rightly?" he asked. "Have I a client, and he's in jail?"

"The charge," said Rocky Pincus, "is murder."

McKee paid for his beer. "Makes it more interesting. Now where can I find the jail?"

"Straight down the street, behin' the court-house."

"Thanks, Mr. Pincus." Buck McKee went again into the hot Montana sun.

GRIMY BROWN hands gripped the cell bars. Upon seeing McKee and the sheriff, wide brown eyes grew even wider. The sheriff did not see Buck McKee's wink, but luckily Tortilla Joe did.

"Done brought you a attorney," the lanky sheriff said nasally.

"A—a what, Meester Lawmans?"

"A attorney—a lawyer."

"Oh, a lawyer, no?"

The sheriff said, "This Mex don't know much English. I jes' call him The Mex, cause he's got a handle about ten names long. Well, go ahead an' talk, Haven." The sheriff checked himself suddenly. "But I'm a-gittin' the hoss behin' the cart." He turned his sunken eyes on Tortilla Joe. "You ain't said yit whether or not you want a lawyer."

"Sure, I take the lawyer."

"You ain't got no money to pay him," the sheriff pointed out. "When we searched you, all you had was forty six cents."

"My client and I will settle my fee. Now, Sheriff Jenkins, if you will only leave us alone to talk—"

"You cain't git this man outa jail. He's charged with murder."

"We want to talk. When you go to your office, close the door behind you."

"I'll go to my office, but I won't close the door!"

The only knowledge Buck McKee knew about the law was what he had learned through the bitter experience of being thrown in jail. "The law of Montana Territory states a prisoner has the right to talk to his lawyer without nobody else listening, Sheriff Jenkins."

McKee was working on the assumption that the sheriff knew even less law than he did, and he saw indecision

pull at the thin mouth. "Wahl, okay."

The lawman's bootheels clumped down the concrete corridor. He did not shut the door completely, though. McKee walked over and pushed it shut, the latch making a click. He glanced again at the three other cells. No other prisoners but Tortilla Joe. Then he grinned at his fat Mexican partner. "You oughta be ashamed of yourself, Tortilla Joe, bein' in the calaboose like this."

"You should know the shame, too. Actin' like the lawyer. What gets me ees how you talks such good Eenglish."

Buck McKee grinned. "Read a lot of grammar that winter I spent the three months in jail down in Nevada. Now, let's hear you talk, Client!"

"Client, the devil!"

"Talk," McKee repeated.

TORTILLA JOE added a few things to what McKee had learned from the angry farmer and his irate wife. But the story was much the same as he had heard spilled from their scared lips.

"I get your letter down in Wyoming, where I was punch the cows for Meester Sheridan. You write to me from Idaho, where you gamble. You say to meet me at Wadsworth Matthews' homestead shack, on the Yellowstone Reever. Then we go eento Canada to punch cows for Meester Weelson."

"I figured you get there ahead of me."

Tortilla Joe's eyes glistened. "I get there four days ago. Wadsworth an' me, we build the fence, an' evenin's we play the cards."

"Get to the point."

"You always are the fast mans," the Mexican said. "Een my country, we talk slow. Night before the last, the raiders they come."

"Why?"

"Wadsworth he homestead on Circle Five grass, so the Circle Five burn him out—he boss of the tumbleweed mens."

"You mean the grangers held a meeting and made him their leader?"

"*Si,* that ees eet. Buckshots. We fight them but we lose—they sneak up an' burn down the shack. And when we runs out, they shoot Wadsworth."

"Bad?"

"Twenty two ribs on one side they are broke."

Buck McKee shook his head. "A man doesn't have that many ribs on one side. No, no use countin' yours—you're so fat you can't feel them. You was lucky to not get shot, Tortilla."

A dusky finger made the sign of the cross. "St. Augustine he was weeth me." The dark jowls fell in sudden sorrow. "But they keel Wadsworth Matthews' dog, ol' Cookstove."

"Cookstove? That's an odd name for a mutt?"

"All the time, when Wad cook, the dog watch the stove, lookin' for the handout—so he call heem Cookstove."

McKee remembered the small grave. "Who buried the dog?"

"They make Wad do that, weeth blood streamin' down hees side. They heap insult on the wound by doin' that. He loved ol' Cookstove, he deed. Raised heem from a puppy—hees wife she leave heem, but Cookstove he stay." Tortilla Joe swallowed with difficulty. "He was the twelve summers old."

"Old enough to die."

"Wad he swear to keel the mens what keeled Cookstove. He go like the mad mans. He try to strangle Rocky Pincus weeth hees bare hands."

"A man can get almighty attached to a dog," Buck said, remembering his own fox-terrier, Mushmouth, who now slept in an Arizona grave he had dug. "I met this charming Mr. Rocky Pincus. What about his boss, though? Old Man Triggs, ain't that his handle?"

"I no know much. I've not been here long and I ask the few questions. But the Treegs, he sit een his ranch-house, like the spider, and order Pincus to do hees dirty work, they tell me."

Buck McKee nodded.

"Treegs not been off the ranch for months, they tell me."

"Maybe he don't need to," McKee said, giving the cell the once-over carefully. "Remember—my name is Haven now. Oliver Haven."

Tortilla Joe's thick lips repeated the name silently. "You get me outa here, no?" His dark eyes were pleading.

Buck McKee reminded his partner that a man charged with murder could not get bail. "And if he could, where would we raise the money?" He glanced cautiously at the door leading to the sheriff's office; it was still closed. "Take this."

Tortilla Joe shoved the little derringer pistol under his bedding. "You packed that in your saddle-bag, no?"

"Took it off a gambler in Reno."

- 2 -

WHEN HE came into the sheriff's office the first thing he noticed was the woman who sat on one corner of the desk. She wore a buckskin riding skirt and she had a nice thigh. She amply filled her white silk blouse. He judged her to be about twenty-four or thereabout, but it was hard to determine her age, because she wore such smooth makeup. She was a beauty.

Buck McKee took his eyes from her with some difficulty. Her brown eyes seemed to hold something mocking, and this irritated him a little.

"Who signed the complaint against my client?" he asked the sheriff.

The woman answered, "Our range-boss. Mr. Pincus."

McKee remembered the man as wide as a neckyoke. His eyes came back to the woman. "And who are you?"

"Lucille Triggs. Mrs. Triggs."

Buck McKee had a moment of surprise he hoped he succeeded in hiding. From what he had heard, Old Man Triggs had no children, so this must be his wife—not his daughter-in-law. Evidently he had married a young one. "Why didn't your husband sign it? Apparently the offense was committed against one of his riders?"

"My husband leaves such things up to Mr. Pincus."

"Looks to me," Buck McKee said slowly, "as if Pincus runs your spread."

"Your opinion is not wanted or asked for, Mr—"

"Haven," McKee furnished. "Oliver Haven. Attorney at Law."

"Yellowstone City doesn't need another attorney."

"So your man Pincus told me."

Buck McKee left, remembering the smooth full thigh. Some guys had all the luck. Then he remembered the set of her mouth, and he changed his mind slightly. Heat still danced in waves across this country. He needed another beer.

Rocky Pincus had just finished his straight whiskey. McKee asked amiably, "A beer on me, sir?"

"Never drink with strangers."

The entire bar heard the insult. Buck McKee felt the touch of his temper, but logic came in and pushed it to one side. This was no place to display temper; he had to use his head. Tortilla Joe had his neck in the noose. "Sorry. Beer, bartender."

Rocky Pincus showed a twisted smile. McKee saw this in the back-bar mirror. "How is your client?" He emphasized the word *client*.

"He seemed cheerful."

"I ought git some of my riders an' lynch him," the range-boss growled. "He kilt one of my best hands, Whitey Jordan."

"Good idea, Rocky," another Circle Five cowpuncher said.

Buck McKee had been afraid of this. "Let the Law take its course," he said as quietly as he could.

"Sometimes the Law acts too danged slow," the foreman of the Circle Five growled.

McKee decided to change the subject. He asked about the whereabouts of Wadsworth Matthews. Rocky Pincus told him Matthews was hospitalized in the hotel. "You gonna make him one of your *clients*, too?"

"Got a man to defend against a murder charge. I need all the evidence I can get, Mr. Pincus."

McKee turned and Pincus said loudly, "Another damned two-bit shyster lawyer, and we already have one in town!"

BUCK McKEE stopped. He knew he could not take that insult. To take it would declare himself a coward and a coward had no place in these rough range-hands. They'd tar-and-feather him and ride him out of town on a rail. Slowly he turned, fists knotted. "Say that again, Pincus?"

The saloon was oddly quiet. You could even hear the flies buzzing against the dirty big window. Pincus' face was happy and gleeful. Dripping wet, Buck McKee wouldn't weigh more than one sixty. Pincus tipped the beams at at least one ninety, and he moved like a cat despite his size. "You heard it the first time. Wanna have a little fight, eh?"

Pincus shuffled forward, fists in front of him. McKee knew he could never whip the man with his fists. One mauling blow from this range-boss, and he would fold up like a water-soaked accordion. His fingers fell around the back of a chair. He swung it with all his might. He heard the heavy seat smash down on Pincus' head. Rocky Pincus grunted, his knees sprang out, and he fell on his face unconscious. McKee was surprised at the rapidity with which he had knocked the man out. A lucky blow, he thought.

He heard the gasp of the bartender, and then his .45 was out—level and jerking, covering the saloon. "Anybody else got anything to say?"

There was a moment more of silence. McKee knew they were surprised at the speed with which he, a lawyer, had pulled his gun.

The bartender was the first to speak. "Means nothin' to me, Lawyer, but if I was you, I'd make tracks afore Rocky come outa it."

"You ain't me." McKee backed to the door, six-shooter a moving menace, and stepped outside, the batwings clipping shut behind him.

Nobody followed.

THE HOTEL owner was a short man with an enormous beer-belly. "Nobody ain't allowed to talk to Matthews! Sheriff's orders!" He blocked the way to the hall. Buck had already found out that Wadsworth Matthews was down the hall in Room Fourteen.

"But I'm his attorney!"

"Don't give a hang if you is his mother! Oh...my belly...you—".

McKee had slammed an elbow into the man's paunch. He had stood enough for one day. He glanced back. The man was doubled over, holding his potbelly. Buck McKee had expected a guard to be posted in Matthews' room, for surely he too would be under arrest for murder, but Matthews was alone in bed.

"Figured you'd hail in soon, Buck."

McKee spoke hurriedly. "The name ain't McKee for now—it's Oliver Haven." He hurriedly told about his role as a lawyer. He was surprised at the physical change that had taken place the last three years in Wad Mat-

thews, for his memory told him speedily he had last seen Matthews down on the Wind River in Wyoming, where the three of them—Buck McKee, Tortilla Joe, and Matthews—had punched cows for the Diamond S outfit. Matthews was thin as a corral rail.

"What happened to you, Wad?"

"Didn't you find out? Them nightriders shot me— They kilt my dog, ol' Cookstove. Best dog what was ever whelped, Cookstove was. And by the stars, they'll pay for murderin' my dog!" The man's voice held a fanatical note.

"I mean how come you lose so much flesh?"

"I bin workin' hard, developin' my land. After my woman left, reckon I never et steady enough. These other farmers—they think a heap of me—they elected me president of the grangers. I done violated their trust, McKee!"

"Haven, you mean!"

To Buck McKee, it seemed that Wadsworth Matthews' mind was slightly out of kilter. Maybe it was the effect of his wound, but more likely, the loss of his dog. Wad always kept referring back to the canine. McKee liked dogs, and he liked women and horses, but he had never seen fit to lose his head over either. But he had early learned in life that one man's meat was another man's poison. He looked at Matthews' thin neck. "You ever see the doc?"

"They ain't no doc here in Yellowstone City. Ol' Lady Milton acts as a doc, but she ain't legally a sawbones. She was the one what tied my ribs."

At this point, the potbellied hotelman barged in, still grimacing with pain. "I think you done ruptured my spleen, lawyer."

Buck McKee grinned. "Sue me."

"You had no call to run your elbow up to your wrist into my stomach."

"Every citizen has a right to see his lawyer."

The man grimaced, face twisted. "I might sue you at thet," he said, and he limped out of the room, holding his side. McKee told Matthews about his incident with the man, and the thin farmer momentarily forgot old Cookstove.

"You ever have a run-in face-to-face with this Triggs fellow?"

"Ain't never even seen him. They tell me he is so ol' an' crippled he rides a wheelchair all the time."

McKee frowned. "You ever meet thet young woman of his'n?"

Buck McKee told about meeting Mrs. Triggs in the sheriff's office. "She's a mighty fine looker," he said, "but I reckon if a man has enough money he can get any woman he wants."

"No female could ever be as faithful as ol' Cookstove. My woman done left me—packed up an' done went—but Cookstove stayed—"

"Seems odd they have no guard posted on you," McKee said.

"What would be the use? I cain't go nowhere. I got a bullet hole in my left laig, too."

"I never knew that."

McKee felt a little uncomfortable. Plainly he was in the company of a slightly demented man. He had a sense of futility, too: mental sickness was something a man had to face but could apparently do nothing about.

"Jes' set tight," he told the farmer.

The last word he heard from Wadsworth Matthews was *Cookstove*. His visit to his friend had accomplished nothing of value. He went into the hall and glanced out the window opposite Matthews' door. Dust lay thickly on the sill and he looked out onto a vacant lot.

WHEN HE crossed the lobby, the potbellied man gave him a sick-looking glance, but remained silent. Outside he met Lucille Triggs. "Rocky

Pincus is looking for you," she said.

"Let him look."

Her brown eyes moved over his long, horsey face. "You sure laid him cold with that chair, and they tell me you know how to handle your gun."

Buck McKee merely smiled.

Her voice was cold and level. "I'm not in your boots—thank God—but if I were you, I'd get on my nag and ride out."

"You're not me," McKee pointed out.

"The Circle Five might be able to use you," she said. "You're about the only man in the country, outside of this farmer Matthews, who has stood up in front of Pincus. Matthews didn't whip him...but you did."

"I'm sort of particular who I work for."

This drew anger out of her, giving her lovely face color. And again Buck McKee noticed the face's hardness. He had met dance-hall harpies and red-light women who also had owned that same metallic rigidity of features.

"Thanks for the—insult."

McKee smiled. "I pack a lot more of them," he assured.

Her smile was automatic. "I sort of like you, Mr. Haven. You talk little and act fast. I think we have passed enough insults for once, do not you?"

McKee thought, *The old soft soap,* and he bowed slightly. "I agree with you, madam."

"Think over what I told you?"

McKee gave this fleeting thought. Something was grouping, out there in the dark; it was taking form and shape—but as yet it was very nebulous. "I might ride out and talk to your husband."

"That would do you no good. He is bound to a wheelchair and his bed; his mind is not too clear. I'm the real boss of the Circle Five."

"Somebody told me Rocky Pincus held that job."

"They told you wrong." She was sweetly cold. "Good day, Mr. Haven."

Buck McKee glanced at her straight, well-built back. But he did not have these thoughts long, for a man crossed the street toward him. McKee judged him as a farmer from his faded bib overalls, his blue chambray shirt, heavy shoes and straw hat. He had a wide, honest, and stupid, face. His name was Neeley. He turned out to be vice-president of the Grangers; elected at the same meeting that had elected Wadsworth Matthews as president. McKee listened to this with patience, eyes moving across the street. He saw a man out in the alley, glimpsing him for a moment between two buildings. He was sure that man had been Rocky Pincus. He was certain also that Pincus had not seen him, or he would have come out to brace him.

"Come to the point, Neeley?"

The farmers wanted to hire him as their attorney.

"The Circle Five owns this other lawyer, Alexander Martin. We need a legal representative—one what will represent farmers, an' nobody else."

"I'll think it over."

He made a mental note: *Stay clear of Alexander Martin.* He might start discussing legal points and the barrister profession, and Buck McKee knew his limitations. Neeley had a hangdog look on his red jowls. "I likes a man who makes sudden decisions, Mr. Haven."

Buck McKee did not get to answer this. His eyes swung to Lucille Triggs, who was approaching, having just stepped out of the General Store, the building beyond the hotel. At this moment, out of the hotel barged the pot-bellied man. His eyes were wide, his voice husky. "Mrs. Triggs, I jes' come from Matthews' room! Mrs. Triggs, it was turrible, I tells you."

"What is wrong?"

Buck McKee heard the conversation clearly. "Matthews is dead!"

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STRANGELY, Matthews lay on his belly. His head was twisted grotesquely. Buck McKee noticed, also, that it was swollen slightly—when he had visited the farmer, the man's neck had been thin but solid.

The potbellied man was stuttering and white-faced, the pain in his belly momentarily forgotten. "I come in—he was a-layin' like thet— I felt of his wrist. No pulse. Looks to me like his neck is busted!"

McKee rolled the farmer over. He put his hands on each side of the thin face and moved the head, hearing the bones grate. Matthews would never avenge old Cookstove. Not in this world, anyway.

McKee glanced at Lucille Triggs. But her face showed nothing except what might be interest.

"I'm gonna git the sheriff," the hotel-keeper said.

Neeley had round eyes. "You think somebody has done murdered him?" His voice was shivering.

"Looks like it." McKee was aware that the eyes of Lucille Triggs and the farmer were on him. "You were the one who saw him last," the woman said quietly.

"He was all right when I left him," McKee said, reading their thoughts. This seemed fishy to both of them, he knew. A strange man—a lawyer—riding into town out of nowhere and taking up the case of the Mexican, apparently intending to help the sodbusters.

He went into the hall and glanced at the window sill. There was no dust there now. Somebody had wiped the sill clean. He looked out onto the vacant lot. Grass was brown from the sun but told nothing.

Sheriff Jenkins came with long strides down the hall. Buck McKee followed him back into the room. Again, he was keenly aware of the suspicion in the eyes of Neeley and the woman.

The hotel-man was jabbering about how he had found the body. The sheriff studied the situation, mouth slightly open. "Maybe he tried to git outa bed, fell an' busted his neck," the lawman ventured, almost timidly. The situation had him hog-tied and branded, McKee saw. He turned on Buck McKee. "I reckon you was the one what saw him last, huh?"

"He was okay when I left."

"Somebody has done got him on his belly, braced a knee against his back, an' busted his neck," the sheriff said. He added hastily, "Or so it appears to my eyes. An' they done a good job, too!"

Lucille Triggs said, "My men are under strict orders not to molest a single farmer!"

NEELEY'S mouth opened slightly. McKee guessed that suddenly the full implication of this murder had seeped into him. "Ain't no farmers safe on this range! I'm a-gittin' outa here!"

He walked hurriedly down the hall. Curious people were in the hallway, wanting to get into the room. A deputy-sheriff held them back.

Buck McKee said, "No use me sticking around here."

The deputy—a burly man—blocked his path. "Shall I let him through, Sheriff Jenkins?"

Jenkins scowled in deep thought. McKee had a notion to slam the deputy over the head with his six-shooter, but he checked this before it got to full life. He was in a rough position. It demanded politics, not power. "I'm not leaving town," he said.

Jenkins swung his dull eyes on him. "You promise thet?"

"I had nothing to do with this murder. I merely talked to Wadsworth Matthews. It looks to me like somebody is trying to frame a murder charge against me."

"Why?" the sheriff demanded belligerently.

"Because I'm a lawyer who took up the sides of the farmers."

This drove open anger into Lucille Triggs' beauty. "That is a damned lie," she said. "The Circle Five is not in this!"

"I didn't say it was," McKee corrected.

The sheriff said, "We can't git nowhere fittin' each the other." He spoke to the deputy. "Let him pass, Heiner. Then clear the hall so you an' me can look fer clues."

"Okay, boss."

Outside, on the worn plank sidewalk, Buck McKee pulled his lungs full of fresh prairie air. Despite the fact that the afternoon was wearing thin, heat still bounced off the old buildings.

He heard two farmers talking beside a buggy. Hitched to the rig was a span of blue-roan flea-bitten poor mules.

"I'm packin' my woman an' kids an' leavin' the kentry, Joe."

"Me, I figger I'll be right ahind you...or maybe ahead."

They saw him. "There's the new lawyer," one said. "Hey, mister, we'd cotton to conflab with you."

McKee shook his head. "No time." Suddenly an idea hit him and he stopped. "How long has old man Triggs and his wife been married?"

They looked at him as though they feared he had suddenly lost his mind.

"I dunno," one said.

"Me, neither," the other replied. "What difference does thet make, Mr. Haven?"

"None, I guess."

He needed another beer. This heat hit a man's gullet like air from an open furnace. But before entering the saloon, he took his pistol free of holster and stuck it down, butt up, in his belt where it was closer to his hand. Then he went into the stink of stale smoke and stale beer.

Rocky Pincus sat on a chair, back against the wall. McKee looked at him and he looked at McKee. But to McKee's surprise, no anger flashed in his eyes. Instead, he smiled tightly; the smile, though, was forced.

"You know how to handle a chair, lawyer," he grunted. He added, "And they tell me you can handle your Colt, too."

Plainly the man wanted no trouble. This was not in the line of things, and warning was thick in Buck McKee.

Buck summoned a smile. "We all get off on the wrong boot sooner or later. I've seen my mistake. I've talked with Mrs. Triggs." He added significantly, "I'm riding out to the Circle Five to have a talk with Triggs."

Pincus shook his head slowly. "Won't do you a bit of good, Haven. The ol' man is in comatose state all the time. Jes' sets there, head down, mouth droolin'. Almost gone, the ol' man is."

Buck McKee wondered about the word *comatose*. This fellow was smarter than he put on, he reasoned. "Won't do no harm, will it?"

"Jes' a ride wasted in the hot sun," Pincus said.

"First I got to go to the jail and tell that fellow there I'm pulling out of his case." McKee downed the last of his beer. "Put a couple of your coldest in a sack, bartender, for me to take with me?"

"Won't do not one bit of good," Pincus said stubbornly.

Buck McKee paid no more attention to the range-boss. He went to the jail. The deputy stationed there at first would not let him talk to Tortilla Joe, but McKee talked the man into letting him go back into the cell area.

"But I go with you."

"This range," McKee told the world, "is overpopulated with stubborn people."

TORTILLA JOE was sitting on his bunk, head in his hands. When he saw Buck McKee, he came up like a fat jumping-jack. "Somebody—they keel—Matthews?"

McKee spoke in a comforting tone. "He could have tried to get out of bed and fallen and busted his neck, then flopped into bed face down."

"They keeled heem!"

The deputy leaned against the bars, chewing tobacco as though he had a grudge against his cud, his eyes and ears missing nothing.

"That's up to Sheriff Jenkins to be decided. I dropped in to tell you I'm withdrawing from your case. In other words, you're without a lawyer!"

"Why you queet me?"

The deputy was on McKee's right so he winked his left eye. Tortilla Joe gripped the bars and Buck McKee noticed that the tension he exerted on the steel suddenly relaxed. "You'll have to get out on your own power," he said meaningly.

"Where you go?"

"It's none of your business, but to satisfy your curiosity I'm riding to the Circle Five to hire out as an attorney to Old Man Triggs."

"Circle Five, no?"

"Yes," McKee said, and left.

The deputy followed him faithfully. Buck McKee glanced at the rifle rack on the wall. Below it was a peg driven into the wall and here hung Tortilla Joe's gun and belt. He gave these a short glance and went outside, leaving the deputy in the office. He wondered where Tortilla Joe's horse was stabled. It did not take him long to find out that the Mexican's buckskin was in the barn back of the court-house. McKee checked and saw that his saddle and bridle were there, too. He almost saddled the horse but he changed his mind: were the sheriff to come into the barn he would see the saddled horse and be suspicious. And the net was slowly drawing shut, Buck reasoned. But just how he was going to pull the loop shut he did not at this time know. He was operating a lot on pure guess-work. And sometimes guesses kicked back and knocked out a man's teeth.

Past experience had many times so told him.

He met Lucille Triggs on the street. "I'm riding out to talk to your husband," he told her.

"You're deserting the farmers?"

"I never joined in with them," he pointed out. "They joined forces with me...or thought they did."

She also assured him that her husband was a complete invalid. She seemed very earnest and sincere. Buck thought, *She's a good actress,* but he merely listened. "I was ready to ride out to the ranch," she said.

"Good. I enjoy beautiful company."

She murmured, "Haven, you have the Irish tongue," but he could see she was pleased. "But first I have to see Rocky. There is a registered package—a little one—for him down at the postoffice. It just came in on the train."

"Can't you sign for it?"

"No, he has to sign."

"I'll be waiting at my horse."

She went into the saloon and soon came out with, "That air in there—it smells awful. Don't they ever air out saloons?"

McKee watched her mount. She came up easily and settled in her saddle. "I guess they never do," he agreed.

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THE DAY was so hot that sagehens stood on the alkali flats with their wings spread out to cool themselves off. A jackrabbit crouched in some sage but did not leap up as they rode by because of the heat.

Buck McKee wondered if he were

riding into a trap. He was very suspicious of Lucille Triggs. First place, spring had wedded winter, and spring must have had a reason; he figured the word *love* was out.

But each mile worked on changing his opinion. Lucille Triggs wanted to talk, and he got the impression she was lonely. To his surprise, he discovered she had married her husband almost ten years ago.

"He came into Chicago with a trainload of cattle and I was a waitress in the stockyard cafe. Sure he's lots older than I am, but he's my husband and I'll stick with him thick or thin!"

She means it, he thought.

"And besides, I love him. But I do wish there was a doctor to tend to him."

"Why don't you take him back east to a doc?"

"He just won't go. I doubt that he'd see a doctor even if there was one in Yellowstone City. He just hates docs."

"I've seen them that way," McKee said. "About the time they die, though, they holler for a sawbones. Are you doctoring him?"

"Rocky gives him shots."

"Shots?"

"Yes, about two years ago—when Rocky came to our ranch—I had written to a doc in Cheyenne, and he recommended shots of something—the name is a mile long. Rocky said he used to be a medical corpsman in the army, and he gives him the shots."

"Have they helped him?"

"Not that I can see. He's sinking, I think."

Buck McKee wondered if he was getting by with his impersonation of a lawyer, and he kept the talk deliberately away from legal channels. This was not hard to do, because Lucille Triggs seemingly wanted to talk about her ranch and her troubles. McKee learned that the first farmer had come in about five years ago.

"My husband did not fight them. He said it was inevitable they came in. I have given Rocky orders not to fight them unless they pick trouble. I wonder who did burn down the cabin and wound Matthews."

McKee wondered if she was as dumb as she talked. "They say the Circle Five did it. A Circle Five cowpuncher was killed in the fight, remember?"

"Rocky said he never ordered it."

They rode in silence for a half-mile. The sun was lowering, but it had lost little heat. McKee found himself admiring the land, for this was a good cow-country—even though the summer had been very dry and grass was burned brown. The sun-cured grass made good cow feed. Fattened a cow fast and gave her lots of milk for her calf.

He knew that Sheriff Jenkins would trail him to the Circle Five, for he had given his word to the lawman he would not leave Yellowstone City. That was all right with him; he never expected to go back to Yellowstone City, anyway. Tortilla Joe, aided by the derringer, should soon break out of jail, and Tortilla Joe knew where to find him. He remembered his old friend, Wadsworth Matthews, lying with his neck broken, his hopes and desires gone forever. This was not a pretty memory. When Matthews had been murdered, the last shaft of fear had been driven into the farmers. Now they would leave the county in droves... leaving the range for the Circle Five. But this latter was, he reasoned, none of his business.

THE CIRCLE FIVE ranch-house was situated in the cottonwood trees along a creek, and behind the ranch-house were the barns, the bunkhouse and cook-shack. The only man around apparently was an old hostler who was cleaning out the barn. Buck found himself admiring the spread—newly-painted, clean, and apparently prosperous. It was a ranch worth fighting for, he thought.

The old hostler hobbled up to them as they dismounted in front of the house. "Take your hosses, folks?"

"Not mine," McKee said, twisting his reins around the hitching-post.

The hostler led Lucille Triggs' horse to the barn. She and McKee entered a big living room with a flagstone floor and many Navajo blankets as rugs. The west end of the big room held a huge stone fireplace. The room was so clean you could have eaten off the floor. "You're a good housekeeper, Mrs. Triggs."

She smiled and said, "I'm a good cook, too. My husband is in his room. But, as I said, to talk to him will do you no good, Mr. Haven."

They went down a hallway. The thick rug on the floor muffled their boots. Mrs. Triggs stood back and said, "This is his room, Mr. Haven."

Buck McKee entered a bedroom. The bed was made, spread tucked around the pillows. Gay lace curtains were on the windows. But he was not interested in the physical properties of the room for his interest was on Triggs. The man was wasted, legs like toothpicks, and he was naked except for his shorts. McKee saw a long thin face, carefully shaven.

Lucille Triggs said, "Honey, this is Mama. I have a man here to see you. He is Mr. H a v e n, and he wants to visit with you." She added, "Mr. Haven is a lawyer."

If Triggs heard her words, he gave no sign of it. His head was down, mouth slightly open. He kept his head down.

McKee said, "Get some cold water, Mrs. Triggs. That might bring him around a little."

"I doubt it."

Nonetheless, she left the room. Buck McKee worked quickly. He lifted Triggs' head, cupping the old head between his hands, and he looked into the man's dull eyes. The eyes were dead and without hope. Despite the heat, Triggs had a blanket across his shoulders, hiding his arms. McKee pulled the blanket up and looked at the man's arms. He saw there the scars left by a hypodermic needle and he remembered Lucille Triggs mentioning the shots administered by Rocky Pincus.

He remembered something else, too. Five years ago he and Tortilla Joe had worked with the Texas rangers one summer fighting the importing of dope into Texas from Old Mexico.

When the wife came with a glass of cold water, McKee was merely standing there looking at her husband. She got Triggs' head up and he swallowed the water, but he still had no response.

"Didn't work," McKee said. "Has he improved any since getting those shots, and how long has he been getting them?"

"Rocky started giving him them about three years ago, right after he came to the Circle Five."

"What do you know about Rocky Pincus?"

She looked at him. "He came up from Texas with a trailherd, heading for the Mill Iron up north. But he never liked to work for the Mill Iron so he hired out to my husband. My husband was up and around then, but since then he has got worse. Rocky takes good care of him."

Buck McKee nodded slowly. Then he asked suddenly, "Do you love Rocky Pincus?"

She did not get angry. Rather, her frown showed her surprise. "That is a foolish question to ask, Haven. Of course, I don't love him."

McKee thought, *she seems honest.* But she also seemed rather stupid. Here Circle Five men had raided Matthews' cabin—a Circle Five man had been killed in the gunfight that followed—Matthews had even tried to choke Pincus to death. Yet she claimed the Circle Five had not conducted the raid. *Oh, well,* he thought, *some beautiful women are smart and others are damned dumb, and she fits into the*

dumb group. He let that thought go into discard. It was not necessary or essential.

"Rocky takes very good care of my husband. He treats him like he would treat his father."

"Then he stays in the house here all the time?"

"His room is across the hall."

McKee said, "Well, I guess I made a ride out for nothing, as you said. And I would like to work for your spread as an attorney. Haven't you the power to hire me?"

"I leave such things to my husband . . . or to Rocky."

McKee showed a smile. "Rocky Pincus would never hire me. Maybe I came to the wrong town to set up an office. I guess I'll get my horse and mosey on, riding clear of Yellowstone City."

"I think that is a good idea."

Buck McKee thought of Wadsworth Matthews, neck broken. He and Tortilla Joe and Matthews had been on many a spree together, even making a Wyoming jail once on a drunk and disorderly charge. Fine fellow, Matthews. Good man to punch cows with. Give you the shirt off his back.

Outside, McKee mounted, looked down on her. "Sure been nice meeting you, Mrs. Triggs." He almost added, *You're the dumbest woman I've ever met,* but instead he said, "Your faithfulness to your husband is a wonderful thing, Mrs. Triggs."

"Thank you, Mr. Haven."

WITHIN ten minutes, McKee was in Rocky Pincus' room. He left the window open so he could make a speedy exit if he so desired. Because the room was on the south side of the ranch-house, it was stifling hot. Sweat made the shirt cling to his back.

Again he had stuck his .45, butt uppermost, in the front of his gunbelt. He worked quickly but thoroughly. Drawer after drawer in the dresser were pulled out, contents rummaged through. Finally he found the hypo and a little box of vials. The box had come in from Chicago by mail. Registered mail, too. Buck remembered the information told him by Mrs. Triggs about the package awaiting Rocky Pincus in the Yellowstone City postoffice.

He broke the rubber seal off one vial and sniffed its contents. And he remembered Texas and the dope-runners.

The big house was quiet, for evidently Lucille Triggs was in her room. Suddenly the door behind him whisked open, and McKee turned with his hand on his gun. But he did not pull the .45, for the gun of Rocky Pincus was on him.

They studied each other. Pincus' tomcat-yellow eyes were hard as Montana agate. His voice was very low. "I trailed you outa town, fella. I saw you leave the spread like you was ridin' away, hide your horse in the brush and sneak back. I don't think you're a lawyer, fella."

McKee grinned, but the grin was sick. Mentally he damned the thick hall carpet. He summoned words with an effect. "No lawyer, eh? Then what do you think my job is?"

Pincus kept his voice low. "I think you're a gover'ment man, trailin' dope. They wrote me from Chicago that they figured the gover'ment was suspicious, and it seems to me that down in Texas a few years back a Mexican an' a string-bean like you worked for Uncle Sam against dope."

"Never been in Texas in my life." He wondered why Lucille Triggs

did not hear their conversation. But then he realized she probably had her door closed and her room was way down the hall. He was sweating more than the hot weather demanded. His gun was wet under his hand.

Pincus watched with narrowed eyes, lips opened slightly. He had the air of a tomcat playing with a gopher he had just captured and would eventually kill. The silence grew and became electric. "What do you aim to do, Pincus?"

"You broke into my room. That makes it robbery, would-be lawyer. I could kill you, and the sheriff would fill out a record you were killed robbing the Circle Five ranch."

McKee stalled with, "You've kept Triggs under dope. You had a package of dope come in today's mail. You been keeping him under morphine. You want to kill him so you can run the Circle Five as you see fit. Mrs. Triggs told me that the steer sales have been low the last few years and this outfit is facing bankruptcy, which is what you want, eh, Pincus?"

"You're too smart, fella. But you'll never get out of this room!" He cocked his .45, the noise sharp. "Well, here goes!"

Buck McKee remembered hearing the roaring boom of Pincus' pistol. But the bullet did not hit him despite the close range. For he had gone to his left, the movement fast and deceptive, and the bullet hit the wall. McKee was on his knee, gun in hand. He shot only once. Pincus shot again but again he missed; that was because a bullet had hit him in the left ribs.

PINCUS took two steps, knees losing strength. He fell over a chair and landed on his back, fingers loosening from his gun. Buck McKee kicked the .45 against the wall. He was standing there, gun in hand, a sickly look on his face, when Lucille Triggs, wearing a flimsy dressing-gown, came running into the room.

"What—what happened?"

McKee had his tongue now. "He's kept your husband under morphine. He killed Matthews—I saw him in the alley, comin' from the hotel. He's been working to get your Circle Five."

"You talk like a fool."

Pincus rolled over, got to his hands and knees, and collapsed again. "Get me—some water—"

Then he collapsed again, this time lying on his belly.

"That package today at the post-office—it contained more morphine. It's prob'ly in his saddlebags."

"I don't believe you!"

She forgot to hold onto the front of her gown, and it came open slightly. McKee thought, *How dumb can they get?* as he backed toward the window.

"Tell it to Sheriff Jenkins," he said, and climbed outside. He was running for his horse in the brush when he heard her screech, "He's dead— He's dead!"

Buck found his saddle and rode out on a wild lope. Within a few minutes, he met Tortilla Joe, riding as if the devil was on his trail with a hot pitchfork. "I use the leetle gon! I break outa the jails!"

They were on a rise, brush hiding them. About a mile away a horseman toiled toward them, riding hard. Sheriff Jenkins was trailing his escaped prisoner. Buck McKee told his partner about the happenings at the Circle Five. Jenkins thundered past them. bent low in his saddle, horse plunging ahead. He had eyes for nothing but the trail; besides, high buckbrush hid McKee and his partner.

Tortilla Joe crossed himself. "Now our amigo Wadsworth Matthews, he sleep peaceful in his coffin."

Buck McKee nodded. "And Lawyer Haven sleeps with him."

"Oliver Haven, Attorney at Laws," said Tortilla Joe, turning his horse. "We swing wide of Yellowstone Ceety, no?"

"And head for Canada," McKee said.

A share in the mine wasn't enough for Fleming; he wanted it all. And of his greed could be played upon ...

GUNMAN'S GREED

by JIM HARPER

WHEN DAVE GORDON reached Uncle Billy's designated mountain rendezvous, he found the other two had already arrived. The girl and the man watched with Uncle Billy before the latter's cabin while Dave tied his horse near a saddled animal in the shade of a towering ponderosa pine.

Dave noticed another horse, unsaddled and hobbled, in a small glade. Nearby was a bedroll beneath a crude canvas leanto. Dave decided that belonged to the girl and that she had been here several days. The other horse, Dave reckoned, belonged to the man who had either just arrived or camped elsewhere at night.

Neither of the trio before the cabin appeared armed, as the instructions had specified, and Dave left his rifle on the saddle.

Uncle Billy moved forward, a challenge in his alert blue eyes. "Are you Dave Gordon, Tom Gordon's boy."

Uncle Billy didn't offer to shake hands. Dave hadn't expected that he would. He said, "Yeah, Tom Gordon's boy."

"You're late!" admonished Uncle Billy. "You were the nearest, yet you are the last to arrive."

It would be difficult, Dave thought, to estimate Uncle Billy's age. His face, healthily tanned, was but little wrinkled. Age's lone inroad on this wiry mountain man was the snowy whiteness of his hair. "I'm sorry, but Dad ..." began Dave, moving his glance to the other two.

The man brusquely demanded. "Where's your proof, and your money? If you're Gordon, produce, if you can't, get out. I'm not waiting any longer."

Dave Gordon curbed his irritation, measured the man. Creed Fleming was about thirty, muscular. The character of his face was bitter, perhaps even brutal. There was an intensely burning gleam in his eyes that Dave could not immediately classify.

"I can produce." Dave reached inside

his shirt where he had the small packet secreted.

"Mr. Gordon..." the girl made an indefinable gesture, and Dave saw something akin to panic suddenly in her eyes. "Mr. Gordon...don't...."

Fleming wheeled on her, interrupting. "I agreed to wait until Gordon arrived, as you and Dupree insisted. Now that he is here, I demand that both of you remain silent until Gordon has properly indentified himself."

The girl dropped her head. Dave knew she was Anita Creighton, saw her small-sized woodman's boots would leave distinctive tracks in mud. He had also suspected she would be coarse, with stolid features and straight hair, but she was lithe and trim of figure. Her neatly groomed hair formed an alluring background for an animated, intelligent face. She was, Dave decided with inner conflict, an attractive young woman of responsible capability.

DAVE GLANCED from her to Uncle Billy Dupree, whose averted gaze busily studied the distant summer sky. But the expression on the young-old face gave Dave cause for wonder. Uncle Billy appeared struggling with inner amusement, and Dave suddenly frowned, nettled.

Then, because Fleming waited with undisguised doubt, Dave drew forth the packet and quickly removed the protective cover of thin rubber sheeting. He spread the contents so that all could see—a thousand dollars in currency and a square of paper which was brittle-brown with age.

"My money, and my part of the map." Dave looked directly at Fleming.

"I'd like to examine the map." Fleming thrust out a hand, but Dave did not miss the glint that flicked across the man's face.

"No," he said, quickly replaced the packet inside his shirt. None of them doubted the flat defiance in Dave's manner and tone of voice.

Fleming darkened, stared angrily at Dave. Then he laughed and glanced at the girl. "Now you can tell him."

Anita spoke, with lowered voice. "I ...I couldn't raise but half my thousand, and Mr. Fleming has demanded that I forfeit my part of the map. If I do, he will claim it, for he has another thousand. Dave, do you...can you..."

"Can I lend you five hundred?" Dave finished, and a weight he had carried was lightened that she had asked him for a favor. He regretted that he couldn't comply. It had taken considerable eloquence for Dave to borrow his stipulated thousand. If this venture ended in failure, Dave supposed he would be many long years repaying the borrowed money. But that now didn't concern him as much as knowledge that Creed Fleming apparently had Anita at his mercy.

Dave toyed with a sudden thought. Did Fleming seek Anita's share for the gold alone, or was it something else? Would not a man of Fleming's scheming caliber also want to be boss of any venture he'd enter? Did Fleming perhaps envision "majority power" with two portions of the four-way partnership? Was his lust for power and two shares of gold strong enough to make him a dangerous partner?

Dave decided on a simple test. He gave a careless laugh, thrust a hand inside his shirt front. "I can't lend you any money," he told the girl. "But unless Fleming agrees to you sharing equally, you and I can forfeit our shares and partnership marjority to Uncle Billy by destroying our identification. I'll tear up my part of the map, and you do the same with yours..."

AVARICE EXPLODED Creed Fleming into physical force. He leaped for Gordon, drove a huge fist against Gordon's jaw, another into Gordon's stomach. Dave doubled forward, gasping for breath. His unguarded chin was a wide-open target, and Fleming struck; Gordon crumpled helplessly onto his face.

Fleming reached to snatch the packet from Gordon, and gain possession of the coveted portion of map. Uncle Billy's sharp voice stopped him. "If you owned all the map, you still wouldn't know where to find the gold. That map was made twenty years ago. Landmarks have changed quite a bit since then."

Fleming stood transfixed. Then his scowling features crinkled. "That's right." he grinned, taking a step toward Uncle Billy.

With deliberate calm, the wiry prospector drew a revolver from inside his waistband, and leveled it. "I was caught once by surprise and resolved it would never happen again," he declared, and Fleming abruptly halted. "Gold brings out the worst in some men—though I kind of expected it would be Gordon, if he was anything like his dad. The reason you three are here, Fleming, is that I'm paying a debt I've owed twenty years to your dads. Miss Creighton shares equally, because I owe all your dads equally."

Fleming was taut with rage, but the unwavering gun discouraged him venting it. He said heatedly: "I believe you're lying. Why require each of us to bring money, if you've struck it rich?"

"The money's for equipment to mine out the ore. You're smart enough to know that."

"I'm also smart enough not to be fleeced out of a thousand dollars! Why write those letters anyhow? Our father's partnership with you was long ago forgotten by them. But you revive it, specifying each must bring a thousand dollars with his identifying part of the old partnership map. If our fathers are dead, the next of kin can come, with the specified map and money." Suspicion thickened in Fleming's angry voice. "I think the money is your main interest, which you thought we'd surrender. Why give her a full share for half price unless you just want to get your hands on the money? Why share the gold four ways anyhow, if you actually have found the lost vein again? A smart man would keep it all himself!"

"That's what you'd do, isn't it?"

Fleming flushed, but persisted sarcastically. "I'm not convinced that you wouldn't, too. I think the only wealth here is what we three have brought. But it'll take a better story than yours to get a thousand dollars from me." Fleming stalked contemptuously to his horse.

Uncle Billy watched Fleming ride away. He asked the girl: "Do you think that way, too?"

She shook her head. "Two things, to me, prove him wrong. The look on your face and the tone of your voice, when you speak of repaying a twenty-year-old debt!"

Uncle Billy cloaked his pleasure with sudden brusqueness. "I'll bring water for Dave."

IT WAS RAINING, Dave Gordon thought in groggy befuddlement as as consciousness crept back. Raining from a cold cloud so low and thick that he could not see. He reached inquiringly for his face and touched a small hand. The cloth-cloud lifted, and Dave looked up into a prettily smiling countenance. Her eyes, Dave noted, were warm with genuine concern.

"There!" Anita said. "You're almost as good as new."

Dave arose with her help, remembered the attack. He stiffened with anger, glanced quickly about for Fleming.

"He's gone," Uncle Billy remarked, "but the scent of gold will keep him near. Dave, twenty years ago your dad was one of the three who joined me to develop a gold vein I'd found. We had a bonanza for three weeks—then it vanished at a rock horse. Gold does strange things to men—when you find it, and when you lose it. Your dad blamed me, lost his head, and near beat me to death before the other two could pry him loose. I figured like-father,

like-son, when you arrived today. I reckon I was wrong, so I'd like to shake hands and say howdy."

"Howdy!" grinned Dave, taking the proffered handclasp. "Dad told me the fight when your letter reached us. He has been ashamed ever since it happened. But losing all he had—well that made it hard on us for quite a long time."

"I know," said Uncle Billy soberly. "That's why I've stayed here twenty years. Losing the vein was hard on *all* my partners, but now I can repay hundreds of times what was lost."

Anita asked a sudden unexpected question. "How is your father, Dave?"

He glanced sharply at her. Remembrance of his last day at home made Dave's lean frame tighten. "Why?"

"I came by your place on my way here, and we had a big laugh that I had come to borrow from you, and you had elsewhere to do the same. I would have waited and come on here with you, except your father wasn't sure you'd come back by there."

Dave couldn't bring himself to voice a direct accusation. "I knew you had been there. It rained a little that day I guess, for I found your footprints in the dried mud. And dad was. . . dead, shot from behind."

"No!" Anita cried, realizing what her footprints must have made Dave think. "I. . . I liked your dad, Dave, and he liked me. I couldn't. . ."

"I know," said Dave, suddenly ashamed for the doubt he had harbored. "I guess I would have know, even if I'd never found you. I'm glad that you two liked each other."

Uncle Billy spoke sagely. "The map, Dave. That's why, I reckon, he died."

Dave Gordon stared, and Uncle Billy grimly went on. "Gold. Sometimes just the thought of it makes a man go mad. Fleming was wild to get Anita's share, then when you threatened to destroy his scheme, he attacked you like a madman. And that he is—mad with greed. You can imagine what happened when your father refused to surrender the map portion to Fleming."

ANITA CREIGHTON shivered, cast an alarmed glance among the trees. "He's out there spying, and he's got a gun!"

"But he doesn't know where to find the gold," Uncle Billy soothed. "Until he does, we're safe."

Dave gave a short laugh. "Unless he decides to kill us for our money, then torture you and make you talk. We've got to catch Fleming before he thinks too much, else that's what he's apt to do."

"You're crazy," Uncle Billy declared, "to go searching for an armed madman among these mountains and trees."

"I was thinking," Dave thoughtfully responded, "of bringing him to us. At least make him show his face, then maybe I could get the drop and take away his gun."

Anita caught her breath. Uncle Billy waited, and Dave went on. "Gold is uppermost in Fleming's mind, and if we pretend it's at our fingertips, he'll probably want to see it and touch it, too. Uncle Billy, do you have an abandoned digging, well away from ambush cover? It'll have to appear recently worked, as if it's where you found the lost vein."

"This whole mountain is full of recently-worked deadholes," Uncle Billy started. "There's one like you want about a half mile away."

"Good. We'll take a pick as if we're going for samples."

Uncle Billy carried the pick, Anita a canteen of water, and Dave his rifle in the crook of his arm. He suggested they keep several feet apart and not present a massed target. But he didn't think Fleming would try picking them off until after he knew their purpose and destination.

The "deadhole" was on a rocky

slope. They quickened their steps as they neared the spot, as if eager to view the coveted wealth. While Uncle Billy entered the cave-like hole, Dave and Anita crouched at the entrance. Anita stared after Uncle Billy, but Dave covertly searched the surrounding terrain. He saw no indication that they were being observed, and centered his attention on their back trail.

Uncle Billy came from the shallow cave, chunks of rock in either hand. In a loud voice, as they had agreed, he called: "Here it is, folks. Gold!"

"Gold!" Anita cried, as also planned, and grabbed one of the chunks. She stared at it as if hypnotized and loudly said: "You say there's a lot of it?"

"Enough to make us all millionaires," Uncle Billy stridently proclaimed, handing Dave the other chunk. Using the maneuver as a cloak, he whispered; "See anything of him yet?"

Dave frowned. He had gambled on Fleming sticking close enough to spy on them, and being so greedily eager to see and touch the newly-found gold that he would expose himself.

But apparently Dave's hurried plan had failed. He felt sweat on his palms and scanned their back trail. But he carried on aloud with the agreed routine. "We'll be rich, all right. We can start mining tomorrow..."

AN EGG-SIZED rock bounded down from above the top of the cave, fell almost at their feet, others following in its wake. Dave started transfixed at the miniature slide, and fear pinched his breath away. He had been watching the trail behind when he should have looked ahead and up. He did, now.

Fifty feet above the cave entrance, Creed Fleming grinned down at them. He wore a holster and cartridge belt around his waist. But the gun from that holster was in Creed's hand, aimed toward them. Dave recognized it as a forty-five, the kind that had killed his father.

Fleming chuckled. "Now I'll have all the gold and the money, too."

Dave had occasionally wondered what a man thinks who is about to die, and now, in surprise, he found Anita predominate among his thoughts. He wished he could kiss her, and wished he had time to tell her.

But Dave did not turn toward her, for he saw Fleming's gaze flick to the chunk of rock he held. He saw greed swiften in the brutal face. With quick impulse, Dave acted.

"It's gold, gold! Just look, it's gold!" And with an underhand toss, Dave pitched the chunk toward Fleming.

The killer was rigid with indecision as the chuck spun lazily toward him. Cunning tried to keep the drop, not reach for the twirling rock. But greed screamed to touch it, to hold it close, to see this sample of the gold that was soon to be his.

Fleming grabbed for the chunk with his left hand. And in doing so, he pulled the revolver out of line with its target.

Dave Gordon instantly spun away from his two companions, whipped up his rifle. Fleming jerked the revolver back in line, but he could not fire in time.

Gordon fired but once, then stepped aside as the lifeless target tumbled down the slope and fell almost at their feet. Dave turned toward Anita then, but there was no need to speak his thoughts. Suddenly she was in his arms, hungrily, happily, trustingly.

"Funny thing," Uncle Billy murmured. "He was standing right over the vein. It starts just beyond this deadhole. Enough to make a dozen men rich, but he wanted it all."

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WESTERN TEST

by HAROLD GLUCK

YOU HAVE been at Fort Benton, and for the last week there has been but one ringing idea in your mind. "Go West!" So you buy a first class horse and a second rate mule. Then you part with a lot of your money for supplies. To protect yourself against hostile enemies you have two of the new revolvers invented by Mr. Colt. But there is still one problem to be solved. You must hire a reliable guide.

"Jed Hawkins is your man," advised Captain Thomas McDonnell. So you pay this famous mountain man a visit and ask him if he will accompany you westward. He looks at you for fully five minutes and then says what is on his mind:

"Before I say 'Yes' or 'No', I give a test. Got eight questions I want to ask. Answer just five of them correct and I'll be your guide. But less than five, then you better stay at Fort Benton."

You have no choice but to agree. So the old mountaineer takes from his pouch his list of questions. Here they are:

1. The Mochilla was:
   a. Mexican Drink
   b. Leather square with 4 pockets used by pony express rider.
   c. Torture devised by Apache.
   d. A trading post in Texas.

2. Ben Holladay was:
   a. Stage coach king.
   b. Famous Western gambler
   c. U. S. Marshal at Abilene.
   d. Governor of territory of Oklahoma.

3. The word OMAHA in Indian language means:
   a. Brave fighting man.
   b. Maker of arrows.
   c. Going against the current.
   d. Rider of horses.

4. Kit Carson in his youth was:
   a. Miner.
   b. Rustler.
   c. Sheep herder.
   d. Trapper.

5. The Westerner who became famous as Buffalo Bill was:
   a. Pat Garrett.
   b. William Cody.
   c. Alexander Majors.
   d. Bill Sheridan.

6. The name Peacemaker was only applied to:
   a. Single action .45 Colt called the Single Action Army.
   b. The heavy .44 Colt Dragoon.
   c. The double action .45 Remington.
   d. The Derringer.

7. The Custer Battlefield is located in what is now the state of:
   a. Texas.
   b. Montana.
   c. Wyoming.
   d. Kansas.

8. The correct name of the animal we call the Buffalo is:
   a. Shaggy Wooler.
   b. King of the plains.
   c. Bison.
   d. Carion.

[*Answers are on page 97*]

Special Feature

by CARL BREIHAN

BLACK BART-- THE SKITTISH HIGHWAYMAN

THE OLD adage, "truth is stranger than fiction," is amply proven in the biography of Charles E. Boles, who, under the alias of Charles E. Bolton, lived in San Francisco, California, as a rich mining man while procuring his wealth as a highwayman known as "Black Bart." From all accounts, Charles E. Boles—alias Charles E. Bolton, alias Black Bart, alias Boulton—was the most elusive and mysterious stagecoach robber that the Wells-Fargo Express detectives ever ran to earth.

Charles E. Boles was a native of New York State, where he was born in the year of 1830. At the age of twenty, he joined the ranks of those who had been infected with Gold Fever, and headed for California. After three years in the mines at various spots in the West, still not having amassed any gold, he headed back East and settled in Illinois, where he met a girl of his choice and married. With the outbreak of the Civil War, he volunteered and was a First Lieutenant in an Illinois regiment, serving throughout the entire conflict. Discharged in 1865, he returned to his family, and remained in Illinois for about one year; then, with his wife and three young daughters, he set out for Oregon. Finding it hard sledding in Oregon he left his family and set out for Montana. For a couple of years he kept in touch with his wife,

then suddenly all communications ceased. Month after month passed with no word from the missing husband, until one day it was rumored that he with several other companions had been killed by Indians. Mrs. Boles then joined her parents in Missouri.

However, in 1874, the errant husband was seen in San Antonio at the horse races. He apparently was well-to-do; dressed in a round Derby hat, a natty suit, and swinging a cane, he stood by the rail talking to an acquaintance to whom he vouched the information that he was going to California and set up a business for himself. He was a shy, soft-spoken individual; unlike most of the sporting fraternity, he never packed a gun, or joined the games of chance, or drank hard liquor. Boles apparently was too skittish a man to stand the rough frontier and soon departed.

In 1875, we find him a resident of San Francisco, living under the alias of Charles E. Bolton—or Boulton—stock broker and wealthy mine owner, whose habit was to leave the city at intervals to inspect his various mines in upper California and Nevada.

The year of 1876 was a suspicious one for Mr. Bolton, whose "mines" were apparently paying fat dividends; strange to say, while Mr. Bolton was absent, the Wells-Fargo Company was losing money.

The stagecoach plying between San Juan and Marysville was held up, with the express box and mail bags being looted about the middle of April. Then, on June 2, 1876, came another holdup of the stagecoach near Cottonwood Peak, where the robber secured a rich haul. Both robberies were committed by the same man—a lone bandit whose face was concealed by a flour sack drawn down over his shoulders. His body was covered by a long gray duster, all that was visible being the man's eyes, which showed through two slits in the sack for eyeholes. The robber was very quiet and courteous; he assured the driver, Al Adams, that no harm would befall him if Adams obeyed instructions. Having rifled the strong box and mail bags, the robber slithered into the brush and disappeared.

NO FURTHER holdups occurred for the balance of 1876; then, on August 3, 1877, as the Point Arenas-Duncan Mills line stage jounced along the brushlined trail, a lone bandit leaped from the bushes. A double-barreled shotgun covered the driver, and a command of "Hands Up" made the driver slam on his brakes. Ordering the driver to turn his back or be shot down, the bandit broke open the strong box, rifled the mail bags, and disappeared into the bushes. As soon as the coast was clear, the driver leaped onto the box and sent his horses at breakneck speed into town, where he notified the law. The sheriff and his posse quickly reached the scene of the holdup, and began a search. On a waybill of the express company the robber had scrawled a note in these lines:

I've labored long and hard for bread,
For honor, and for riches,
But on my corns, too long you've tread,
You slick haired sons of bitches.
BLACK BART, the P.O. 8...

Although the lawmen did not catch the robber, they now at least had a name—one that was to plague them for several years. The miscreant robber left plain tracks into Guerneville; there, all traces were lost. The note and the name attached were all that they had uncovered. Again the mine owner, Chas. E. Bolton, had been absent from his office.

On July 25, 1878, as the stage running between Quincy and Oreville was approaching the Berry Creek crossing, the lone bandit again emerged from nowhere, and, covering the driver, ordered him to throw down the treasure box and mail bags. The driver obeyed and was then ordered to unhitch his horses

and drive them to the back of the coach. The robber then took the cash and valuables from the strong box, slit open the mail bags and did likewise. Once again he had struck the line. Before leaving the scene he scrawled these lines:

Let come what will, I'll try it on,
My condition can't be worse,
But if there's munny in the box,
It's munny in my purse.
BLACK BART, the P.O. 8...

Although the writing was plainly disguised it was likewise as plainly that of an educated man.

At the end of July, the bandit again put in his appearance. It was early morning and the stage driver whistled cheerfully as he neared a turn on the trail between La Porte and Butte. Just as the stage made the turn, the bandit halted it and driver Dan Berry found himself covered by a shotgun. Once more the stage was filched and the robber took to the woods. No trace could be found by the lawmen, when they arrived upon the scene. On October 2, 1878, a stage was stopped twelve miles from Ukiah, on the Cahte-Ukiah run. Still seeking more loot, the robber struck again the following day—this time on the Cavelo-Potter Valley line. A posse, which was soon on the trail, picked up tracks leading into Colusa, but here they lost all traces of their man.

In picturing a holdup of a western stage, one's mind depicts the robber baron dashing upon the stage, his pistol or rifle covering the driver and ordering him to halt. Having completed his work, the robber then makes his escape —perhaps just ahead of a posse which follows him, sending lethal lead in his direction. Black Bart, however, was a unique operator. He never was known to ride a horse, or to use other means of transportation than his own two legs; and his ability to cover long distances was remarkable. He could set out at a fast walk and keep going for as much as fifty miles or more at a stretch before calling a halt.

AFTER TWO holdups, one after the other, only a day apart, the top man of the Wells-Fargo Company took charge. With a score of his operators, he combed the district for several miles, and this systematic search paid off. At a remote ranch, one of the men was informed that a stranger dressed in miner's garb had stopped there for food. A minute description was provided: a man of average height, lean body and wide shoulders, weight about 150 pounds, his eyes a light gray, and deep-set, heavy eyebrows, black hair sprinkled with gray, and a heavy mustache and imperial. The man had no visible weapons. On his shoulders he packed only a blanket roll. This description was circulated by Wells-Fargo detective J. B. Hume; then all he could do was patiently to await results.

With the approach of Fall, Mr. Bolton returned to his San Francisco address and was found in his usual haunts. He was a fastidious dresser—white shirt, black tie, well pressed dark clothes, and on his head wore a little round derby hat often called a dice box. A silk handkerchief peeked from his breast pocket, and with a walking stick he would stroll about the streets. Although living at the Webb House, Mr. Bolton took his meals at a neighborhood restaurant, which also was patronized by police officers and newspaper reporters. While partaking of his luncheon, he could then overhear the conversations carried on by other guests; and as Black Bart was a top subject, he avidly absorbed all the latest news as to what was being done regarding the elusive bandit. None of those present ever had the slightest idea that this quiet little man could be the dingy-dressed character who robbed stages. They paid him no heed as he dawdled over his coffee, until the last of the guests had departed.

June of 1879 arrived; Charles E. Bolton, as was his custom, closed his office, and took his usual tour of inspection of his "mines." June 21 arrived with Black Bart halting the stage on the line running between La Porte and Oreville, securing his loot and doing his usual disappearing act. Four months later, on October 25, the Yreka-Redding stage, in northern California, was held up and robbed. The following day the bandit struck again. This time he hit the Alturas-Redding line stage and again made good his escape. Leaving the scene, this remarkable walker covered a distance of fifty miles before pausing; and having again eluded his pursuers, he reached home. November saw him going about his usual business at his San Francisco address.

All winter he remained in town; but when with the arrival of July, 1880, he again went on his usual tour of "inspection." His first inspection was concerned with what was contained in the Wells-Fargo box carried on the stage running the Point Arenas-Duncan line. As the stage neared Henry Station, Black Bart, like a Jack-in-the-box, appeared upon the scene. The stage was halted, as usual, by a lone figure standing in the middle of the road. On the stage at this time were two residents of San Francisco, a man and his wife. This time, however, the bandit had confederates; several guns were to be seen poked through the bushes, and the tips of hats visible. Calling to his cohorts to cover him, the bandit ordered the driver to throw down the box and to remain quiet. He then broke open the box; slit the mail bags, and having procured the contents, he waved the stage on its journey. Black Bart did not in any manner disturb the passengers, who quietly watched his proceedings. The stage again on its way, the bandit stepped into the foliage, and removed a half dozen black painted broom handles and old hats, which had been set upon sticks, and which had served as his "confederates." Once again the baffled lawmen scoured the neighborhood, but found no trace of the robber "band."

THE FIRST day of September, 1880, Black Bart again took up his vocation. Driver Cramer of the Weaverville-Redding line was held up and the stage box looted. Black Bart then headed into a ranch yard, in Shasta County, and at the house secured food; after that, he worked his way into Tehama County and disappeared. Two weeks later, he had traveled north almost to the Oregon line, where he held up the Roseburg-Yreka line stage as it traveled south. Pickings must have been good, for he remained in that neighborhood until January of 1881. The northbound stage on the same line was his next victim. His hunting season then over, the man worked his way south and reached his usual haunts in San Francisco. Apparently Black Bart had drawn a sizeable sum from his investment of time spent the past winter, for he did not leave home until later than usual.

On August 31, he appeared back in the same area where he had spent the previous fall. He inspected his first "mine", which came traveling along the route of the Roseburg-Yreka stage line. The driver, Bill Lulloway, was stopped and ordered to rest, while the highwayman looked over his valuables. The Yreka-Redding stage was the next to be intercepted as it neared Bass Station on the stage line. Black Bart carried out his usual procedure—he rifled the strong box and disappeared. Just three days later he struck again, holding up the Lakeview-Redding stage driven by Louis Brester as he drove his stage up the grade of Round Mountain. The gunny-sacked head and the long gray duster were now familiar sights, and the driver discreetly did not offer any resistance. A large posse was organized but with no results, as usual. The

indefatigable legs of Black Bart had been so well brought up that they couldn't bear to see him captured, and they transported him deep into Butte County, where all trace of him vanished.

The 15th of December, 1881, witnessed the robbing of the stage plying the Downieville-Marysville route, and again Black Bart disappeared. He was back on the job January 1, to celebrate the New Year. by holding up the San Juan to Smartville stage, and securing a good haul, after which he departed from Yuba County. January was drawing to a close, so Black Bart closed his nefarious crimes for the time being by robbing the stage near Cloverdale on the 26th of that month. A posse tracked the bandit as far as Kelseyville, and he was seen near Colusa at a later date, but escaped.

Early in July of 1882 Black Bart was again on the job, and began the season's work by robbing a stage near Little Lake. His next attempt was on July 13, when—despite this unlucky date—he picked upon the stage between La Porte and Marysville. This line, having been held up on several occasions, had installed a shotgun messenger to protect the Express Company's money. When Black Bart leaped into the road he met resistance for the first time in his career. With the bandit's call to halt, the messenger went into action; George W. Hackett sent a load of buckshot winging at the highwayman. Black Bart lost all interest in the strong box and mail, and lit a shuck as fast as his legs could carry him into the bushes. The stage was carrying a large amount of money, and the driver did not tarry in the neighborhood, but drove full speed into town, and a posse was soon after the robber. Black Bart did not make his usual speed it appears; the posse was so close to him, at one time, that he took refuge in a hollow log, where he remained until the coast was clear. A derby hat was found by the posse, in which several holes made by buckshot were discovered.

BLACK BART remained quiet until the middle of September of 1882 before starting up again; then, up in Shasta County, he held up a stage about a dozen miles from Yreka. After taking the valuables from the strong box, Black Bart requested the driver, Horace Williams, to convey his respects to J. B. Hume, a special agent of the Wells-Fargo Company.

Black Bart's compliments to J. B. Hume were duly delivered, and at a later date Mr. Hume returned them to him by placing Black Bart behind the prison bars.

On November 24, 1882, Black Bart struck the stage line some six miles out of Cloverdale. The driver quickly reached town and a posse took the trail, which led towards Lower Lake, where the posse sighted the bandit; but this vigorous walker was too much for the posse, and he outdistanced the men on horseback.

Spring of 1883, Black Bart opened his season by returning to the scene of his last operation; again stopping the Cloverdale stage, he forced the driver to unhitch his horses and to drive them some distance behind the stage. Black Bart then rifled the strong box; took to the brush and again made good his escape. The month of June found him in Amador County, where he held up a stage in the vicinity of Jackson. His haul packed in his duster, he went his merry way, and from a distance watched the disgruntled lawmen chase themselves around the scene of the holdup; then he headed back to town. Bart seemed to be anxious to get in his winter supply of gold, for on November 3, 1883, he was prepared for the stage from Sonora, Calaveras County, as it topped a grade in the trail—or perhaps he

was cognizant that it carried a good amount of dinero. At any rate, as the stage approached a huge boulder, Black Bart suddenly appeared and ordered the driver to halt, then unhitch his animals and place them some distance back of the stalled stage. The strong box on the ground, Black Bart proceeded to break the lock with an axe, and a smile crossed his face as he lifted $5,000 from the box. He was about to make his departure, when a bullet sped past his head. Without a moment's hesitation, the little highwayman took to his heels, his booty under his arm. With his departure a youth of around sixteen years of age approached the driver. He was a youngster living in the neighborhood, who, with his .22 Calibre rifle, had been out hunting; seeing the masked man and the unhitched teams, had surmised the reason and come to the driver's aid.

Meanwhile, Black Bart cached his ill-gotten gains in a hollow stump and made tracks out of the district. In his rush to get away, he left his derby hat and his linen handkerchief, which had become caught on a twig. These small and insignificant pieces of wearing apparel were to prove his downfall. Driver McConnell hitched up his horses, then burned the breeze for Copperopolis and gave the news.

Within a short time of Black Bart's departure the posse, under Sheriff Ben Thorne of Calaveras County, appeared upon the scene, and the derby hat and the handkerchief were discovered. Near the spot where the robber had stood when fired upon, a pair of field glasses was found. Detective John N. Thacker of the Wells-Fargo Company, was in the posse; when he examined the handkerchief, he knew that here was the most valuable clue picked up so far. On the piece of linen was a laundry mark *"FXO-7."* This evidence was placed in the hands of Special Agent J. B. Hume of the Wells-Fargo Company, the same man to whom Black Bart had conveyed his greetings via a stage driver, and who also had been working on the case for several years. Detective Hume called in his assistants, Harry N. Morse and John N. Thacker, for a consultation.

"There seems little chance of this laundry mark being used by any small town laundry men, so we'll concentrate upon San Francisco first," remarked the chief.

EACH OPERATOR on Hume's staff was assigned a certain district, with instructions to canvass every place where washing was done, private or large laundries. Slowly, but surely, the detectives covered their assignments, all anxious to see the robber run to earth. By this time there were rewards out for Black Bart's capture amounting to $18,000. Detective Morse had about run out of laundries; and, all told, the men had visited almost a hundred places without results. Finally Morse reached a tobacco shop run by T. C. Ware, on Bush Street. Ware also acted as agent for a laundry concern; and when shown the laundry mark, he had no difficulty in tracing it to a customer named Charles E. Bolton.

"Sure, I know Mr. Bolton; he is a mining man—owns mines in California and Nevada, and goes there every summer to inspect his property," vouched the storekeeper.

The men were still in conversation when Mr. Ware suddenly looked out the window and exclaimed, "There he is now."

Charles E. Bolton was just passing the store, on his way to the Webb House, which was located at 73 Second Street. Mr. Ware called Bolton into the store, and introduced the two men.

"Mr. Ware tells me you are a mining man, Mr. Bolton, and an expert on ore. I have a number of specimens in my office, and would appreciate it

if you could accompany me there and examine them for me."

Mr. Bolton and the detective then headed downtown together. Down Bush Street to Montgomery, thence via California Street, they reached 320 Sansome Street, where they entered and proceeded into an office...the office of Special Agent J. B. Hume. Bolton realized then that he had stepped into a trap, but he lost none of his nerve. Detective Hume wasted no time in preliminaries; stepping to a hat rack, he proceeded to take from it a small derby hat, which he extended towards Mr. Bolton, with a request that he try it on.

Charles E. Botton nonchalantly complied and then remarked, "It fits me, sir; do you wish to sell it?"

"I would hardly feel justified in trying to sell you a hat which already belongs to you, sir," replied Hume.

In the meanwhile, a detective with a search warrant had ransacked Bolton's room; the detective soon appeared in the office, and delivered a bundle which contained a double-barrel shotgun, unbreeched; a gray linen duster; and an old Bible, in which appeared the name of Charles E. Boles—and which was the man's real name. The Bible had been given to him by his wife while he was in the army. With such indisputable evidence placed before him, the man at last gave in and admitted that he was the culprit, Black Bart.

"We have your shotgun, Mr. Bolton, but where do you secrete your ammunition?" asked Mr. Hume.

A smile flitted across Bolton's face as he replied, "Gentlemen, I never owned any. In all my holdups, my gun was always empty. After serving in the army, and seeing what a lot of misery a gun could bring to humanity, I swore never again to fire a gun as long as I lived; and I have kept that vow!"

BLACK BART, having confessed his robberies, then agreed to take the officers back to the scene of his last holdup; in the hollow stump the officers secured the haul of $5,000 which he had taken. During the period of over seven years that Black Bart had operated, it is claimed he got away with the sum of $50,000; but all that the company ever recovered was this sum of $5,000. He also admitted that, when he had first gone to California, he had worked in the mines at Butte, El Dorado, Shasta, and in Trinity Counties. Thus, being well acquainted with that district, he had chosen it for his field of operations.

Taken to Mokelumne Hill, where he had robbed a stage, he was arraigned in the Superior Court; and on his plea of guilty as charged, he was sentenced to serve six years in San Quentin Prison. He started serving his time on November 21, 1883, and was released from custody on January 23, 1888.

Black Bart had proved a model prisoner, and when released from prison he returned to San Franciso, where he called upon Captain John Thacker, chief of the Wells-Fargo detective force.

"What are your future plans now, Mr. Boles?" asked Thacker.

"I'm going straight; I found out that crime does not pay," replied the man.

"Are you going to write poetry?" he was asked.

"No!" emphatically answered Black Bart. "I swore I wouldn't commit any more crimes, didn't I?"

Many reports were circulated that Black Bart was paid a monthly pension by the Wells-Fargo people on his promise not to rob any more of their stages.

In regards to this man's real name there are a lot who claim that even the name of Boles is not his real name, although that was the name he had in the Bible which was discovered in his

room, and on the fly-leaf of which was the name Charles E. Boles. He had been known as Barlow, then Spaulding, and Bolton or Boulton, and the mystery of his parentage has never been satisfactorily solved. Following his release and after visiting San Francisco, he vanished, leaving to posterity a romantic interest, which keeps alive even after a lapse of over seventy years.

Although Black Bart had secured thousands of dollars during his career of crime, he did not have a penny left when his term expired. He was a sucker for scheming stock manipulators, where most of his money went. It is also reliably testified that much of it went to the poor, who lived in the districts where he worked as a robber, and that in return these people sheltered and fed him between times, as well as to give misleading information as to the direction he had taken after a holdup, thus he had been enable to evade the law for many years before being apprehended.

Suffice it to say, there has been no parallel in the history of crime which can compare with that of the career of Charles E. Boles. Imagine robbing numerous stagecoaches with an unloaded gun, and escaping each time without the aid of a horse, using only his two feet to cover great distances in a short time. Seven years a holdup artist without firing one shot; then being run to earth by means of a handkerchief!

He had a deathly fear of horses.

There was a little man, who owned a little gun,
He had no lead to load it, just carried it for fun,
He'd use it to stop a stage, and drivers acted smart,
And when his gun, he displayed, they always minded Bart.

★

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THE REBEL SHOT LAST

by SIDNEY OFFIT

. . . Just as he had in his previous gunfight. And no one had suspected the reason . . .

THE GROUND was thick with snow that night Abe Cragmore and I rode up to the Reb's house on Rock Hill to ask for help. It was December, and the driving winds brought down flurries of snow from the high cliffs of the surrounding mountains. The house was the first sign of life in the middle of the snow, the mountains and the occasional skeletons of trees. It was a strange house, built plain and square with no windows. A whirling rise of smoke came from its small chimney.

We rode the last hundred yards silently, only the soft tread of our horses interrupting the complete stillness. When we came near the house I saw a little wooden cross wedged in the middle of a pile of stones. "That's where he buried the dog," I said. "Peculiar kind of man could love a dog and have nothing to do with men."

"Rebs are sentimental that way," Abe said, "and so are drunks."

None of us doubted that the Reb was a drunkard. It was the only way we could account for the awkward weave of his stride, and the isolation he'd forced on himself.

Abe Cragmore and I dismounted before the grave and walked the rest of the way to the house. There was no place to hitch our horses. We held our reins in our hands as Abe knocked on the door.

"You do the talking first," he whispered to me. "Tell him you were there the night he shot Wade Murson, and put it to him as to how we need the same kind of shooting now."

The door opened suddenly, smashing back against the wall and revealing a man with two guns drawn. He was standing there much the way he had that night he'd shot Wade Murson. The grey jacket of the Confederate army uniform hung loosely over his shoulders and the thick leather belt with the gun holsters swished against his thigh. "What are you after?" he asked in a low Southern voice.

"We come to talk to you," Abe

Cragmore said. "We need your help."

"You gentlemen from town?" the Reb asked. He was still holding the guns, his eyes fixed on a point beyond us.

"We come five miles," Abe nodded.

The Reb pushed his guns back in his holsters and stood with his feet wide, still blocking the door. The wind from the outside blew in, caught the smoke from his fire, and lashed it around the room. There was no light other than that of the fire; shadows weaved across his face, playing tricks with the color of his beard which, I remembered, was red.

It was my turn and I felt uneasy before his cool indifference. "A gunslinger named Willis Cuddy is in town," I began. "He's killed our sheriff." The words came out low and metallic, with none of the urgency I'd hoped might move him.

Abe saw it wasn't going well. He jutted a finger toward me. "Lou was there the night you shot Wade Murson."

"We need a man who can shoot like that," I tried again. "There aren't many men can take the first shot and come out of a gunfight alive."

THE REB didn't look at us, his eyes still staring beyond us. "I don't like gunfights and killing," he said. "None of this has anything to do with me."

Abe Cragmore shifted the reins in his hand. His voice came out strong and angry. "You shot Murson because he killed your dog. These are people we're talking about now. Cuddy's picking fights with anybody in town he's a mind to; we're asking you to do for your neighbors what you did for your dog."

The Reb didn't seem to hear him. He said nothing. Cragmore started to mount. "I can't put it no better way," he said. "It's up to you."

I could hardly hear the Reb when he said, "I haven't got a horse. Who's to take me to town?"

It was a long quiet ride back. The Reb sat on Abe's horse, his arms drawn tight around Abe's back and waist. Abe asked him once why he'd decided to come west after the war. He'd started telling us about his home in Virginia, but before he'd said more than a few words his voice trailed off and that same distant look came back into his eyes.

We got to town toward midnight. The streets were covered with snow, but there were a fresh pair of tracks that led into the bar. We knew we wouldn't have to look for Willis Cuddy.

"I don't think it'll be hard to prime him for a gunfight," Abe Cragmore said as we drew our horses up to the hitching post.

The Reb's voice came out soft and calm. "I reckon as to how I'd like a drink, gentlemen. It was never this cold in Virginia."

We hitched our horses and started into the bar. There was a long mirror behind the counter and as we stepped in Cuddy reeled around to face us. He didn't look like a killer; his face was smooth and plump, and when he smiled his large eyes twinkled. They were twinkling after he'd gunned the sheriff, taken the badge and hung it on his own chest.

Cragmore taunted him. "We're buying a drink for the best gunslinger in town, Mr. Cuddy, so you better sit tight and shut up."

The three of us moved to the bar and ordered whiskey. Cuddy followed us carefully, his lips drawn in a cautious smile. "That your gunslinger?" he asked, pointing a long finger toward the Reb.

Cragmore nodded.

Cuddy's face flushed. "He don't look like no gunslinger to me," he said.

The Reb was standing the furthest

away from Cuddy. I don't know if he was cold or just plain scared; but when our drinks came, he slid his hands across the bar until he touched the glass. He lifted it with both hands and splashed some of the drink as he swallowed fast.

I wasn't so sure of him then, and I could tell Abe Cragmore wasn't either.

CUDDY bounced his hands off his holsters. "Here or outside?" he asked to the point.

The Reb turned away from the bar. He started toward the door, walking in a slow uncertain shuffle.

"He's half loaded," Cuddy said as if reading our minds. He smiled with certainty and followed the man we'd called our gunfighter.

Cragmore and I left the bleak grey lights of the bar and came into the whiteness of the night. The Reb and Cuddy stood back to back and then each man trudged off ten paces in the snow.

"How'd he get drunk so fast?" Cragmore whispered to me.

I shrugged my shoulders, and started thinking about the chance Cragmore and I would have against Cuddy.

The air was clean and still, and when the first gun went off it sounded like the bolt of a cannon. It was Cuddy's shot, but the Reb's bullets came at almost the same second.

Abe Cragmore and I stood rooted, not quite believing what we saw. The Reb had drawn first; I was sure of that. But for some reason he'd let Cuddy fire first. At the sound from Cuddy's gun, the Reb had lunged to the side and fired. Cuddy curled up and fell to the snow like a wet saddlebag. The Reb stood, his guns lowered but still firm in his hands. A thin trickle of blood came from his shoulder, rolled down the grey uniform and made little red teardrops in the snow. snow.

I remembered it'd been the same way that night he shot Wade Murson for killing his dog. Murson, too, had shot first.

We went to him and Cragmore spoke. "Hurt bad?" he asked.

"Just the shoulder," the Reb said. His voice was warm and level. And then— "How about Cuddy?"

In that moment Abe and I both understood. "You've done us a great service," Abe said. "If only we would have known—"

"Nobody ever asked," the Reb answered. He started back toward the thin light from the bar and the sound of a glass placed on a table—the only guides for his failing sight.

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by Harlan Clay

Al Nelson rode out into outlaw country to find Laredo Wade, the man who'd shot down Nelson's brother. He found him—dead, and found that he himself was suspected of murder and robbery!

IF AL NELSON had known he was riding a race against death, he would have made the rangy buckskin travel much faster. As it was, he jogged leisurely across the dry, dusty flat, crossed the pole bridge spanning Dry Creek, and was about to enter Crosstrails when those shots at the saloon cut loose.

Up there at the hitching rack Al saw a frightened sorrel horse squat on his haunches, rear back on the hackamore rope, break away and go running across the hills. Nelson's first impulse was to pursue and catch that horse. Yet he rode straight and fast for the saloon. Soon he was standing there, tall, straight and rigid, in the doorway of that dusk-filled room.

He saw a man lying on the floor, face down. He knew it was Hank, his kid brother—knew that Hank was dead. A half-dozen men in the saloon were like statues. They watched the newcomer move forward, bend over the man on the floor. They watched Nelson's big hands clench. Heard his flat voice say: "Who shot him?"

"I did," said Laredo Wade, a dark, shaggy-haired man who owned a small horse ranch out at Spur Springs. Al's piglike eyes watched Wade suspiciously. And Wade's hand still clung to a gun that had snuffed out a life. "He made me do it. I'll leave it to—to Pete there."

"Yeah, Laredo's right," said Pete Tallondice, a smooth-faced, rather handsome man who lived by what profits he reaped over the poker table. "Hank was too drunk to be playin' cards. When Laredo got lucky, Hank

started callin' him a damned, colt-thievin' halfbreed', and a few other names no man can take. Then both of 'em went for their guns and—well, Laredo was a little faster. That's all there was to it."

"I wonder about that," Tallondice said, his eyes meeting steady gaze. "After all, Hank was tellin' the truth and—"

Unarmed himself, Al Nelson risked death and the fate of his brother, when he leaped at Laredo Wade. Nelson leaped like a springing mountain lion and knocked upward the quick gun that Wade was again attempting to bring into action.

A shot went throught the saloon ceiling. Nelson's big right fist came up like a rocket and smashed to Wade's unshaven face. But there was time only for that one blow. Pete Tallondice and the others were swarming in on Al, seizing his powerful arms, pinning him helplessly against the bar. It took four of them to do it. The fifth man, Ben Fleming, the saloonkeeper, was helping Wade up, was shoving him, dazed and bleeding, out the door. Was telling him to "get to hell outa town."

"I'll ketch up with him," Al said. "He shot a drunken kid—and while you yellow coyotes stood by and let him." Then Al called Fleming and his other patrons out. His gray eyes blazed their fury, his words like the cracking of a whiplash.

"The best thing you can do, Al," said Tallondice calmly, "is to bury your dead, and let Laredo Wade alone." The gambler turned, walked out of the saloon.

The next day there was a new grave in the Crosstrails burial ground. And there was a fresh wound in Al Nelson's heart that felt like a barbed arrow there. Al was moving away from that filled grave, untying his buckskin horse when Ken Frazier, a husky, tow-headed youth, came up and said, "I'm mighty sorry about this whole thing, Al. So is Aileen here."

Al's eyes, agate-hard, shifted from Frazier to the face of the young man's sister, then back to Ken again. Al growled "You stood there in the saloon. watched Wade murder my brother. If you'd showed a little nerve then, Frazier, I'd have appreciated it a lot more that I appreciated your sympathy now. Besides, it was you that started Hank to runnin' to Crosstrails. Playin' cards. Drinkin'. Raisin' hell."

"Now hold on, Al Nelson," put in Aileen, and her blue eyes flashed a little. "Handsome Hank hung around our ranch enough. He choused after Ken more than Ken ever choused after him."

"Maybe it seemed that way—at the last," Al replied. "But Hank didn't come to your place to see Ken; he went to see you. He was in love with you. He fell for your pretty blue eyes. But he had a rival that was richer, if not as handsome. You know who I mean—that tinhorn card shark, Pete Tallondice."

"Oh!" The girl's lips trembled. "So you think the Nelsons stand head and shoulders above Pete, do you? If my brother had been killed in a drunken saloon brawl, I don't think I'd be preaching about—"

"Your brother probably will," Al said tonelessly, "if he don't change his ways. And don't get on your high horse with me, Miss Frazier. I'm not hypnotized by your beautiful blue eyes—like my brother and Tallondice. And, after all, the Fraziers have things to live down."

"Throwin' Dad's record in her face, are you?" growled Ken. "Just 'cause Dad made a few mistakes when he was young, and the law was against him. Against him so much he wouldn't've got a fair trial, if he'd stood trial for that last shootin' scrape he got into—"

"He had to run," Al said stonily. "He's still on the loose, Notch Frazier is. And with a price on his head. That

ought to be a lesson to his son, but it ain't. Hank's killin' won't be a lesson to you either, Ken. Nor you don't seem to realize that your mother's had about all she can stand when it comes to—"

Al stopped abruptly. Hearing a footstep, he had turned to see frail little Mrs. Frazier, her step faltering, her hair streaked with gray, moving from the Frazier buckboard toward her son and daughter.

"I'm sorry, Al," said the little woman, and tears stood in her sorrow-haunted blue eyes. "I—I always thought the world of Hank."

"So did I, Mrs. Frazier," said Al huskily. "It—it was nice of you to come here today. You and your daughter and son."

"Come home and have supper with us, Al," said the little woman. "It's too lonely for you to go home, back to the homestead and—"

"No thanks," he said quickly. "There's some things I—I have to tend to."

"Now, Al," she said kindly. "There's one thing you mustn't do. Try to settle this thing with guns. Don't go to Spur Springs, start shooting it out with Laredo Wade, however much you must hate him at this moment. I know how those things turn out."

"I'll remember what you say," he answered.

"Al! Please promise me you won't go to Spur Springs and—"

"Why worry about him?" Ken growled. "He blames me for draggin' Hank to the saloons and poker tables. He blames Aileen for makin' Hank fall in love with her. He's been throwin' Dad's mistakes in our faces."

Al's fist was clenched. He wanted to spare a frail little woman this talk of her vanished husband. He wanted to silence Frazier with a blow to the mouth. But he couldn't, not with Ken's mother standing there. So he swung to the buckskin's saddle, rode away.

Rode out across the hills that were basking in the warmth of a June sun. Yet the heart of Al Nelson knew no kindly warmth. He kept seeing that fresh-made grave back there on the little rise above Crosstrails. Kept seeing Aileen Frazier's hostile eyes. Kept hearing the sarcastic voice of Ken. And the pleading voice of a sickly little woman who was suffering for the wrongs of her husband— Notch Frazier. Notch Frazier who had killed a man, and had gone back to the dark, mysterious trails from which he had come.

Al realized the futility of making the fifty-mile trip to Moundville, the county seat, and having a warrant sworn out for the arrest of Laredo Wade. Witnesses to the shooting of Hank would swear that Wade shot only in self-defense. Those witnesses had made that evident enough, particularly the gambler, Pete Tallondice. Al would deal with Wade in his own way.

BACK AT the homestead on Coulee Creek—Al had made final proof on that homestead only last month—there was nothing but loneliness now, an oppressive solitude that hung like a pall about the cabin, corrals and the little pasture where grazed a few head of horses. Among those horses was the stocking-footed sorrel that Hank had ridden to town yesterday. The horse that, frightened by the shooting in the saloon, had broken his hackamore rope. Al had caught the sorrel after a long chase last night, had brought him home and unsaddled him.

It was nearly supper time that evening when Nelson, packing clothes and cooking utensils in some boxes, heard a footstep there at the door. His hand dropped to his gun, then came slowly away. The visitor was Aileen Frazier.

"Mother made a cake and had me bring it over," said the girl. "She asked Ken to bring it, but he pulled out before it was ready."

"He probably had business at the Crosstrails saloon," Al said.

"Maybe...Why are you packing your things?"

"Thought I'd be takin' a little trip."

"Don't be a fool, Al. You've worked like a dog here on this place. Are you selling—"

"Nope."

"If you *do* want to sell this place, Pete Tallondice has mentioned buying a place where he could raise some blooded horses."

"I wouldn't take his filthy money, even if you would like him livin' closer to the Frazier place. Money he stole from Hank. Money he's still stealin' from your locoed brother. If that smooth-fingered crook don't marry the Frazier place, he'll win it over a poker table."

"Which, of course," said the girl coldly, "is none of your business."

"It is the business, though, of the woman who baked that cake. You and your brother might remember that. Well, thank your mother for me, Aileen. And thanks to you for all your trouble."

"Don't mention it!" snapped the girl. She set the cake on the table, turned and walked to her waiting horse.

Al's gray gaze followed that slim, high-headed girl. Nelson thought it was too bad that the younger Fraziers were like their father—reckless, quick-tempered, strong-headed. Aileen hadn't been that way, not until her father had got in a scrape and had to run. Al wondered if the girl's attitude was only a mask.

Al didn't sleep much that night. He got up before daybreak, saddled his buckskin horse. He drove the stock in the pasture out on the open range, then shut the pasture gates and wired them out. He headed for Spur Springs then, and with his old gun strapped on him.

He was within a half-mile of Wade's cabin when he sighted a rider loping across the lightening hills. Al halted, watched that rider until he was beyond sight. Then he rode on up to Spur Springs, rode there to kill the man who had killed his brother.

Quietly, afoot, Al approached the cabin. He pushed the door open quickly, stepped inside. And felt something as he had felt upon stepping in the Crosstrails saloon the other evening. A man lay on the floor, a dead man—Laredo Wade. There was a glassy stare in the small, piglike eyes that were unaware of coming dawn. There was a dark stain on the cabin floor. There were two nickels, a dime and a quarter strewn across the floor. Another coin—No; it wasn't a coin. It was a small silver ornament, about the size of a dime.

Al picked it up, studied it a moment, slipped it in his pocket. He closed the cabin door and went back to his horse. But he didn't ride toward the nearby mountains, as he had intended doing when leaving Spur Springs. He rode back to his cabin at Coulee Creek, unpacked some cooking utensils and got breakfast.

That afternoon Al rode over to the Frazier place, a small ranch in the next valley. Within a mile of his destination, he met a drunken rider whose black horse was taking him home—Ken Frazier.

"Well, if it ain't Mr. Nelson," mumbled the drunken man. "Too bad the best one of the Nelson brothers got plugged. I miss Hank, but I'd sure as hell never miss you!"

"You better get off your horse, take a sleep in those willows—" Al pointed to the bank of Antelope Creek—"before you go home. Your mother's entitled to something better than the sight of you—the way you are."

"Still meddlin' in other folks' business, eh?" Ken mumbled. "For two cents, I'd get off my horse and do somethin' else. Belt you one in the nose."

"Try it," Ken invited.

"All right. I will." Ken half-fell as

he dismounted, but got his balance and clumsily lifted his fists.

Al moved toward him, ducked those awkward, ineffectual blows coming at him. Then he grabbed Ken and threw him in the shallow creek a few feet away. The first time, he had to drag the drunken man out. The second time Ken was sober enough to get out himself and try to rush Nelson. And for the third time the younger man landed in the creek.

It was rough treatment, but it was sobering. Ken started talking better, or swearing better. Al didn't throw him in the stream any more. He just stung him with one sharp slap after another, and until the other man's face was redder then anger had made it.

WITH HIS alcoholic courage ebbing quickly, Ken began backing away from those sharp, stinging blows. He wasn't rushing any more.

Al said finally, "What happened to your left cuff there, drunk?" He indicated the highly-ornamented leather cuff on Ken's left wrist.

"Nothing happened. Why?"

"Ain't one of those little silver things missin' from that star?"

"What if it is?"

"Well, I'll give it back to you. Here." From his pocket, Al took the silver ornament. "I found it in Laredo Wade's cabin at dawn this morning, Ken."

The younger man's mouth had flopped open. Speechless for an instant, he said. "You're lyin', Nelson. I ain't been to Wade's cabin."

"You were there, all right, Nelson said evenly. "'I saw you ridin' away. And I saw Wade lyin' there dead. What's the matter, Frazier? Did you get hard up? Did you want the money you knew Wade had? And were you smart enough to know that somebody else might get blamed for that murder?"

Ken swallowed hard as he stood there in the scrutiny of those unyielding gray eyes. There came the sound of hoofs in the sandy road of the creek bend. Then Aileen Frazier rode up and said, "For heaven's sake, Ken. It's about time you were getting home. Mother started me out to town to get you." The girl's eyes lifted. "Who are those riders coming this way?"

Al turned quickly, watched three riders angling down a ridge. He recognized Deputy Sheriff Howard Brink. Another rider, wearing dark clothes, looked like the gambler, Pete Tallondice.

Ken was frozen in his tracks for a moment. Then he blurted to Al, "You won't tell 'em that—"

"Shut up! I guess they've found Wade, I'm gettin' outa here!" He moved to his horse, jumped to the saddle and rode fast upstream, disappeared around the bend.

The buckskin was rangy and fast and sure-footed. He lined out toward the mountains, toward a land of canyons, timber, desolation. Once Al looked back. Big Howard Brink, well mounted on a baldfaced bay horse, was taking up the chase.

Al sped into the yawning mouth of a rock-ribbed draw, swerved around into the shade of a rock, big as a cabin, which protruded out into the draw's sandy floor.

A minute later the thud of sand-muffled hoofs came to Nelson's ears. He didn't reach for his gun. He undid the buckle of his rope strap, flipped a loop in his lariat, waited there as a steer roper waits for a steer to be released from the chutes.

A shadow moved on the floor of the draw. A loop hissed out, snared Howard Brink and yanked him from his saddle. The deputy had hardly landed when Al was standing there by him, and holding a gun.

"If you ever get to be Sheriff, Brink, better watch how you're chasin' a man," Al said. "Some use lead instead of lariats, you know."

Spitting sand, Brink glared at the menacing gun.

"What are you doin' here alone?" Al demanded. "Where's you pal, Tallondice, and the other fellow?"

"They're ketchin' Aileen Frazier's horse or tryin' to. He stampeded with 'er."

"How come you were in Crosstrails?"

"I heard that there was trouble there, between you and Wade," Brink answered. "And there was. You killed Wade. I found him about noon today. But you wanted more'n revenge, Nelson. You wanted Laredo's money. And you got it—along with his life! That's why you hightailed it when you seen me comin'!"

"What are you goin' to do about it now, Brink?" Al regarded the slightly plump, weak-chinned man coldly. "Was it Tallondice that sent for you to come to Crosstrails?"

"Well, what if it was?"

"I just wondered," Al reached out, slipped the gun from the deputy's holster. "Now I'm wonderin' if you can ketch your horse, or if you'll have to walk back, in shame and disgrace, to the Frazier place?"

"I'll ketch my horse!" Brink growled. "And I'll find another gun. When I do, you won't pull this trick a second time. You and your damned rope!"

Fuming mad, but very anxious to get away, the deputy got up and started after his horse. Al swung to his buckskin, rode up a tributary of the draw. On a timbered ridge, he looked back. He could see Brink riding toward the Frazier place—the place where a frail little woman had known grief, disgrace, heartbreak. A frail little woman who wouldn't be able to withstand the shock of knowing that her only son, as well as the son's father, was a murderer.

Al could have ridden across the Deerhorn Mountains, but he wanted to slip back to Coulee Creek, get his horses, take them across the mountain and sell them.

The second night, in quest of grub as well as in quest of horses, he tried to get back to his cabin. But when he saw that his horses were back in the pasture, he became suspicious of a trap. Howard Brink had probably posted men around the Coulee Springs place and—

Two rifles broke loose on a cedared knoll above the Coulee Creek cabin. Lead sang its death song around Al Nelson. He whirled his buckskin, sped

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across the starlit hills—and was glad that he had been wary. He headed for the mountains again, for that far-distant notch in the horizon which was Moccasin Pass. Running away from a crime he hadn't committed, but one which he would have committed—if Ken Frazier hadn't beaten him to it. Al wondered what would become of the homestead on which he had worked so hard, wondered what would become of his few head of horses back there in the pasture....

Bitterness rode with the lonely, hunted man who trailed through the star-hazy night. Having spent what cash he had on Hank's funeral, Al was flat broke. He needed those horses. Yes—and he'd get them! He'd wait a week, go back to Coulee Creek. In the meantime, there was old Tobe Conner's camp on Bald Mountain, an out of the way place....

AT DAWN Al came to Conner's camp, but it was deserted. From the look of things, the old prospector-trapper had been away several days. Maybe he'd found a few nuggets, had gone to town—some town—for a spree.

Al cooked breakfast on an open fire at the mouth of the smoke-blackened cave where Tobe lived. Afterward, he went up on the mountain's top and looked over the country; but if he had left a trail that might be followed, he saw nobody following it. And he stayed there on the top of the mountain till well past noon.

In the afternoon he slept. The sun was low when Al awakened and sat up to look around. He saw a rider coming up Bald Mountain, but there was no cause for alarm. This stooped, gray little rider was mounted on a burro. It was old Tobe Conner.

Al reached camp by the time Con-

[*Turn To Page* 82]

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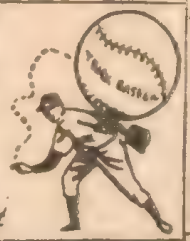

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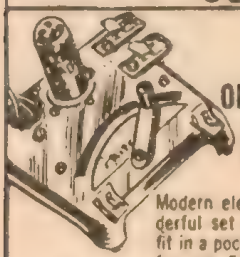

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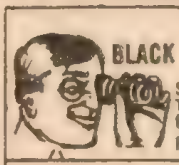

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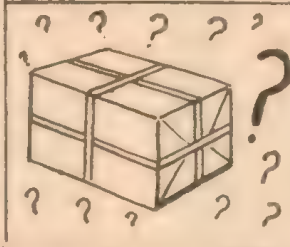

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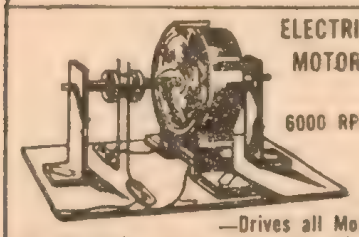

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ner did. The latter stared a moment with bleary blue eyes, then grinned a toothless smile and said, "You, Al. I hear down at Crosstrails—damn their cheap whisky—they're lookin' for you. Well, they'd be lookin' for me, too, if Laredo Wade had killed—murdered—my only brother."

"You see Howard Brink?"

"Nope. He's out here scourin' these mountains for you."

"Seen any of the Fraziers?"

"Yeah," came the reply. "I seen 'em buryin' Mrs. Frazier alongside your brother."

"Tobe! What the hell—"

"Her heart went back on her, like folks've expected. I guess they had a big ruckus out at the Frazier place. Pete Tallondice, the damned card crook, wanted to marry Aileen. Mrs. Frazier said she wouldn't have her daughter marryin' a tinhorn gambler. Then Tallondice reminded her what her husband was and—well, it was too much excitement for Notch Frazier's wife. Maybe she's better off, though."

Al stared at the ground, said nothing.

Tobe resumed: "I feel sorry for Aileen, though. An outlaw father, a drunken, no good brother—and now a dead mother. She looked like she wished she could die, too, when I seen her, tried to say a few words to her."

"That damned Tallondice," Al growled. "I'd like to choke him to death!"

"And Ken, too," said old Tobe dryly. "That ranch's gone to hell now. Ken will gamble it away in no time."

"Like hell he will!" Al answered.

"Who'll stop him?"

"Maybe I will...Sorry, Tobe, but I've got to be on my way."

"Wait—three four days, Al. Let Brink get tired of huntin' you. You disgraced him when you took that purty pearl-handled gun there away from him. Coward that he is at heart, he wants your scalp. Yeah, as bad as he wants to be sheriff of Deerhorn county next fall."

[*Turn To Page* 84]

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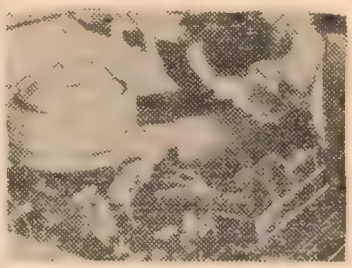

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I—I guess you're right," Al reluctantly admitted, and kept thinking about Aileen Frazier. He thought of Ken, too. The man who had killed and robbed Laredo Wade. Anger fanned through Al Nelson then.

Yet he waited three days before he saddled his buckskin horse and rode down the mountainside. It was midnight when he left Bald Mountain. It was daybreak when he reached the ravine-gashed foot-hills above his cabin on Coulee Creek, and started riding down the deepest of those ravines.

The silence of dawn was suddenly broken by the sound of shots that echoed along the ravine. Al halted, tensed in his saddle. Listened. Then he saw a rider coming around the bend below—big Howard Brink, bareheaded, riding for his life.

Close behind the deputy sped another rider, a tall slim man on a buckskin horse. The man on the buckskin fired a quick shot at Brink, then he saw Al—and blasted another shot at him.

Lead raked at Al's curled hat brim. Then his own gun was out, and he was fighting for his life. He triggered two rapid shots, and saw the slim man on the buckskin sway in his saddle, yet he still tried to shift his sagging gun and fire again at Nelson.

Al fired once more. The slim man

[*Turn To Page* 86]

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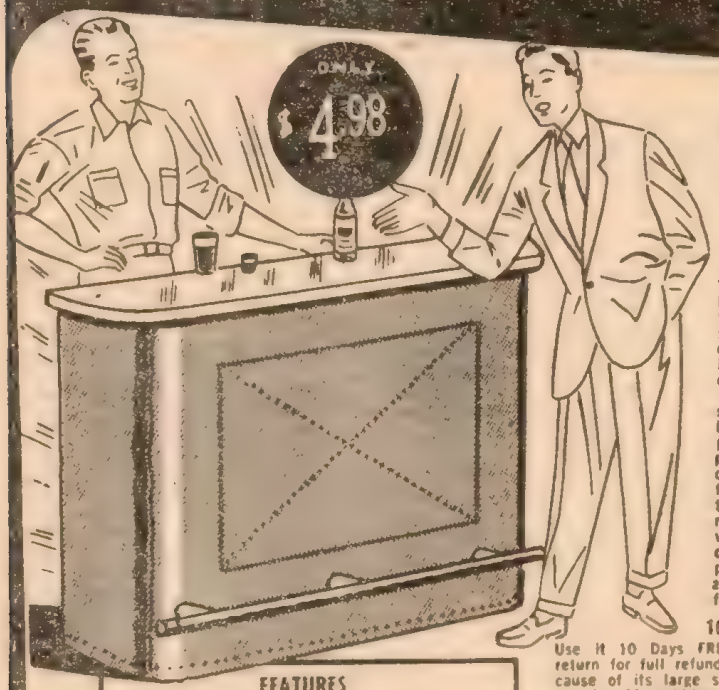

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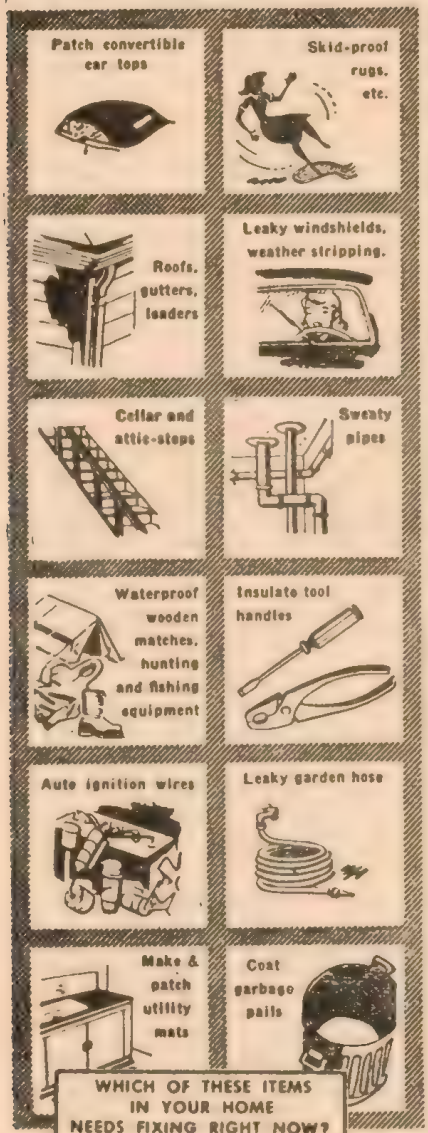

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toppled from his snorting buckskin while Al, the echo of gunfire ringing in his ears, spurred forward, swung from his saddle and peered at the fallen man.

"You, Nelson," said the hard-eyed, iron-gray man. "My old neighbor—throwin' in with the law—to help—ketch me."

"Notch!" said Al, and looked without malice down upon the outlaw whose right ear had been nicked with a bullet many years before—the reason for that nickname he had borne with the scar. "Why the hell did you risk comin' back here?"

"I heard about—Martha. I had—to see—the kids. Had to kill Tallondice—damn him—but now you and Brink—Aw. hell!" The fading voice ebbed completely.

"I wasn't ridin' with Brink!" Al said in a low voice. "If you hadn't *made* me kill you, Notch—" He knew that his words were falling on deaf ears, so he didn't talk any more.

HE TURNED, looked up the ravine and saw Howard Brink peering around a jagged pillar of rock there.

"Come on down here, you damned coyote, and pick up this gun and you lost in your excitement!" Al called.

"You—you won't kill me?" quavered the other man.

"Come on!" Al commanded. And soon Brink, his face colorless from terror, his big hands trembling, was there beside Nelson.

"What happened?" Al demanded. "I know! You saw that buckskin horse of Notch Frazier's—and thought it was me. You followed him down this ravine, tried to shoot him in the back—like the coward you are—and didn't shoot quite straight enough. He turned on you—Is that right?"

"Well, I did think—"

"Am I right?" Al growled.

"Yeah," was the answer. "Then he started shootin', put a bullet through *my* ear—look at it bleed—and—"

[*Turn To Page* 88]

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"And scared you to death!" Al interrupted. "He'd killed you—if he hadn't made the mistake of tryin' to kill me, and when he thought I was with you."

"There's a fifteen hundred dollar reward on Notch Frazier!" Brink suddenly blurted. "Damn! I just now thought of that!"

"You think you're goin' to collect that reward, Brink?"

"Why not? You can't collect it. You're a wanted man, too, Nelson." Brink was getting enthusiastic now.

"What happens to me, Brink? What do I get for savin' your life?"

"Yeah, that—that's right, ain't it?" Brink pondered. "Well I'll give you a chance to run, Nelson. Get outa the country."

"What if I decided to kill you first?" came the stony reply.

"No!" croaked the other man.

"If you want to keep on livin', we'll do it this way," Al answered after a long pause, "If you want the glory of killin' Notch Frazier, if you think that'll help you out next election, you can turn the reward money on Notch over to Aileen Frazier. No; don't do that. Give it to old Tobe Conner up there on Bald Mountain. He'll know what to do with it."

"Well, that suits me, Nelson."

"All right, Brink. That's your promise to me for savin' your neck."

"That's right. Uh—now I guess I'll take Notch to the county seat and—"

"If I thought Aileen Frazier could feel any worse than she feels right now, I wouldn't stand for that, either," Al said. "But maybe it'll be a relief for her to know what happened to her dad. And there was only one end for him."

"You're r i g h t," Brink agreed. "Wait'll the folks in Crosstrails and the folks in Moundville, see me comin' in with Notch Frazier. Wait'll they see them bullet holes in—"

"Shut up, you damned vulture!" Nelson growled. "If you were half a man, Brink, you wouldn't do what

[*Turn To Page* 90]

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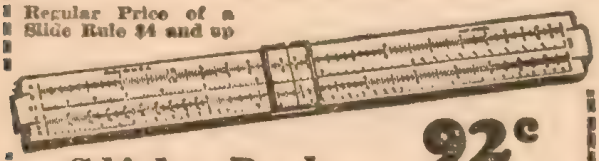

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you're doin'. You're yellow to the core, and I hope you're never elected sheriff. But remember this—you'll never live to run for Sheriff if you don't turn that reward money over to Tobe Conner. Savvy?"

"I savvy."

"You wouldn't want Aileen Frazier to know *you* killed her dad, would you?" When Al made no reply, Brink grinned and added, "I thought it was your brother that was in love with that girl. Your brother and Tallondice—"

"She hates me like you do—deep in your heart," Al responded.

"You'd better ride outa the country," Brink said.

"I'll be in this country till that reward money's delivered." With that remark, Al rode away; but he kept watching Brink over his shoulder until the deputy was put out of sight.

Remorse rode with Al Nelson. He had wanted to kill Laredo Wade, and had been denied that chance. He had not wanted to end Notch Frazier's life, whatever Frazier was. Yet that fate had been thrust upon him. Well, there was some small consolation. A kindly little woman would never know what kind of death her husband had died. And Aileen—although she must never know how—would be the richer by fifteen hundred dollars. Money that her drunken brother couldn't touch. . . .

On a hilltop Al looked southward. He saw Brink riding toward Crosstrails—and leading a burdened buckskin horse. The sight was revolting to Nelson. He visualized Brink riding into town. Brink with his chest thrust out, convincing lies on his lips. Pompous, gloating Howard Brink, the yellow-hearted. Basking in the plaudits of the gaping populace. . . .And making a bid for the support of voters. . . .

Al rode back to Bald Mountain, told Tobe Conner what had happened. Concluded by saying: "I hated to drag you into this mess, Tobe. But I didn't know how else to get that reward money to Aileen."

[*Turn To Page 92*]

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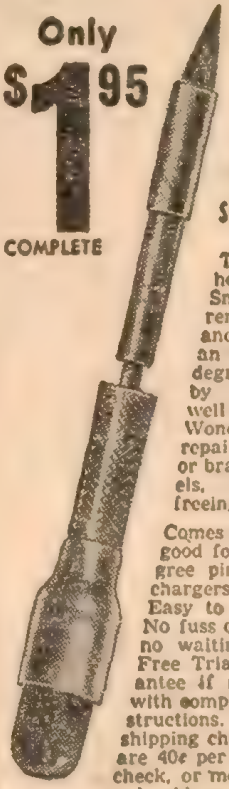

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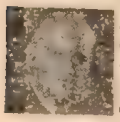

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"That part's all right, Al. But will Brink keep his part of the bargain? I mean, about deliverin' the money to me?"

"Could you stand another trip to the county seat, Tobe? You can switch to that roan horse of mine when you get to Coulee Crick. Travel a lot faster. Too, you'll find a twenty-dollar bill cached in the toe of that old boot under the bunk in the cabin."

Tobe grinned. "I allus go to town when I get a few dollars, Al. But I won't get as drunk this time as—well, some people might think I'm gettin'." Pretty soon Tobe was riding down the mountainside.

Al knew no peace in the days and nights that followed. Time after time he walked up on Bald Mountain, sought sight of old Tobe returning. It was about dusk of the fifth day when Al, about ready to risk a trip to Moundville himself, thought he glimpsed a pair of riders disappearing into Big Stone canyon.

Al walked down the trail below Tobe's camp.

Two riders entered the clearing. Al tensed as he recognized them—Howard Brink and Pete Tallondice. The forner was saying, "We'd better split here, Pete. I'll circle around, walk down to the camp from the other side. You take it slow and we'll meet."

Tallondice laughed shortly and said, "Lucky for you, Howard, you've got a real gunhand along. Well, it'll mean your worries are over. And mean seven hundred and fifty dollars in my pocket."

"You're a goner, Tallondice!"

As he said that, Al moved into sight. Brink sucked in his breath sharply, audibly. Tallondice made no sound. The gambler went for his gun. It flashed in the moonlight. Then Al Nelson's gun roared, the echo of that shot hammering at the trunks of pine trees.

Brink's gun came out, and a spurt of flame leaped in Al's direction. That hastily-fired bullet didn't hit the man

[*Turn To Page 94*]

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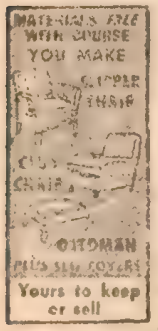

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for whom it was intended, the man who had bowled Pete Tallondice from his saddle. It clipped off a pine twig above Al's head. Al answered that shot with one of his own.

It caught Brink through the chest, but Al didn't see him fall. His gun was swerving back toward Tallondice who, lifting himself to one knee, was bringing up his gun.

Again the powder flame of Al's gun lanced out lightning that struck Tallondice down. Yet the gambler still clung in desperation to his weapon. He fired from the ground, and straight enough that Al could feel a burning sensation across the upper part of his left arm, a sticky moistness on his sleeve.

He put another shot in Tallondice. The gambler's spur made a crooked mark in the earth. Then his feet, his hands, were still. Very still.

Al moved cautiously toward Brink who lay there gasping. The victor said, "So this is the way you kept your bargain, eh, Brink? By trying to sneak up here and kill me?"

Brink's eyes rolled wildly, then became fixed. He didn't answer the question put to him. He was dead.

Al searched him, found the well-filled money belt he sought. Money that had been put on the head of old Notch Frazier. Suddenly Al's eyes focused on the far edge of the clearing, and his gun whipped up. The weapon lowered. He stared at Tobe Conner, mounted on a roan horse. Stared at Tobe's companion, a girl whose hair shone in the moonlight.

"You—you're all right, Al," said Aileen Fraizer, and her voice sounded strained. "Tobe and I were afraid that—"

"I'm proud of you, Al," said Tobe, leaving his hard-puffing horse. "I thought that when Brink slipped outa Moundville, on pretext of goin' to the Brush River country, that he was lyin'. When I trailed him to Crosstrails, found he'd picked his pal Tal-

[*Turn To Page 96*]

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183. Ladies' solitaire ring. Large brilliant simulated diamond in center, 6 smaller stones. Yellow or white gold color effect.

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149. Ladies' engagement ring. Large, simulated diamond, 2 smaller stones. 1/20 14Kt. gold filled or 1/30 14Kt. RGP or Sterling Silver.

154. Men's massive "Good Luck Horseshoe" ring. 4-leaf clover. White or yellow gold color effect.

146. Ladies' dinner ring. Gorgeous, large simulated diamond and many smaller white or colored stones.

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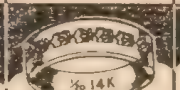
189. Men's signet ring with sparkling, simulated diamond. Heavy yellow gold color effect mounting.

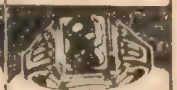
112. Men's exquisite Masonic ring. Yellow gold color effect. Must be seen to be appreciated.

150. Men's Indian Chief's head ring. Yellow or white gold color effect. Also in boys' sizes. Ring comes also in engraved, hand carved Cameo Set.



138. Ladies' Friendship forget-me-not and modern style wedding ring 1/20 14Kt. yellow gold filled or 12Kt gold plate or heavy Sterling Silver. Assorted designs.

18. Boys' and girls' signet ring. Yellow or white gold color effect or Sterling Silver.



137. Men's beautiful, heavy Cameo ring. Large 2 toned Cameo. Classic knight in armor and girl design. Yellow or white gold color effect.

64. Men's traditional wedding ring. Sterling Silver or yellow or white gold color effect.

162. Men's massive lion head ring. Large simulated diamond in mouth, 2 smaller red stones in eyes.

118. Ladies' engagement ring. Large, brilliant, simulated diamond and many smaller stones. Unusual step design. Sterling Silver or yellow or white gold color effect.

116. Ladies' exquisite wedding ring. 9 or 7 matching, simulated diamonds all around. Finished setting. Sterling Silver or yellow or white gold color effect.

163. Men's ring. Large size ring, simulated red ruby 1/20 12Kt. yellow gold filled or 1/30 14Kt. RGP. Also white gold color effect.

171. Ladies' engagement ring. Large brilliant, simulated diamond with 4 or 6 smaller side stones. 1/30 14Kt. RGP.

170. Ladies' graceful wedding ring. 7 brilliant, good sized, matching, simulated diamonds. 1/30 14Kt. RGP.

127. Men's ring. Beautiful, large, about 4Kt.-size, simulated red ruby stone. Stone comes in all colors. White gold color effect.

141. Ladies' cluster dinner ring. A beautiful gem 7 or 12 brilliant, simulated diamonds. Center stone also in simulated red ruby. Pierced mounting. Sterling Silver or white gold color effect.

104. Ladies' gorgeous dinner ring. Large, brilliant simulated center diamond, 6 medium-size and many smaller stones. Very rare with so many stones. Ring also comes in carving design.

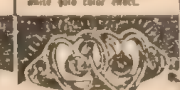
148. Ladies' exquisite engagement ring. 2 large, brilliant, simulated center diamonds, 2 or 4 matching side stones. Sterling Silver or 1/30 14Kt. gold RGP.

42. Unique hand-clasp love & friendship ring. Comes apart to form 2 rings. Sterling Silver.

144. Men's massive set-down discharge ring. Heavy Sterling Silver or yellow gold color effect.

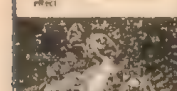
73. Ladies' beautiful 2-toned Cameo ring. Yellow gold color effect.

169. Men's large square tail simulated garnet ring. Yellow or white gold color effect.

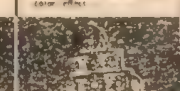


152. Sweetheart ring. 2 simulated rubies on entwined hearts. Yellow gold color effect.

184. Men's solitaire ring. Large, brilliant 2Kt.-size simulated diamond. Fine heavy mounting.



141. Ladies' dinner ring. Gorgeous peacock design. 15 sparkling, simulated rubies, sapphires, emeralds. World or yellow gold color effect.



149. Ladies' dinner ring. Unusual design. Large, brilliant simulated diamond, about 10 smaller stones. White gold color effect, or Sterling Silver. Ring also comes in oval or square shape design.

167. Ladies' exquisite cluster dinner ring. 3 large, simulated diamonds and many smaller stones. Sterling Silver or white gold color effect.

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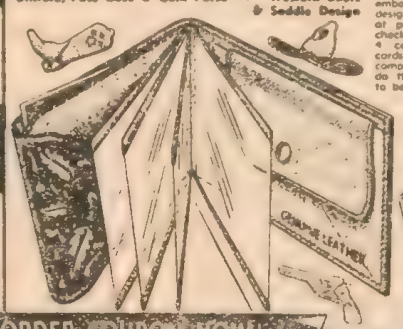

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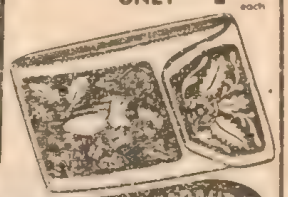

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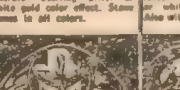
164. Ladies' birthstone ring. Sparkling, square-cut, 1Kt to 4Kt.-size simulated green emerald. Sterling Silver or white gold color effect. Stone comes in all colors.

151. Men's U. S. Simulated red ruby in center, 2 simulated white diamonds. Yellow or white gold color effect. Also with 3 large white stones.

142. Men's U.S. Army insignia ring. Heavy Sterling Silver or yellow or white gold color effect.

145. Men's U.S. Navy insignia ring. Heavy Sterling Silver or yellow or white gold color effect.

144. Men's U.S. Marine Corps insignia ring. Heavy Sterling Silver or yellow or white gold color effect.



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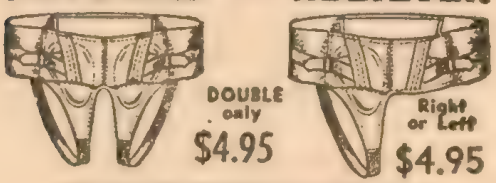

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londice up, I *knew* he was headin' this way. But—hell! I didn't know you'd be waitin' for 'em 'fore they ever got to camp!"

"I have no regrets," Nelson answered. "I'm on the run anyway."

"Not for the killing of Laredo Wade," said Aileen. "That day you threw Ken in the creek to sober him up, I heard a little of your talk—before you thought I did. And I knew why you ran when the law showed up. You did it to save mother's feelings, save her life perhaps. Well, she's gone now, Al. And I've made Ken come through, give himself up to the law, admit that he killed Wade. Not only for money, but for the killing of Ken's best friend—Nelson."

FOR A LONG moment Al made no response. Then he said, "Ken's in Moundville? In jail?"

"Yeah," said old Tobe. "But he'll get off light, they say. Besides, the saloon keeper in Crosstrails found out that Tallondice had fixed things up with Wade to get rid of Hank—Tallondice's rival."

Al Nelson looked at the dead gambler, "The scum! I'm glad I killed him. Only I wish somebody'd done it sooner!"

"So do I, Al," said Aileen. Then she added, "The way things turned out, Tobe just about *had* to tell me the truth of Dad's killing, too. About .the reward— the reason Brink came up here."

Al tensed. This news had disturbed him more than the threatening guns of two killers with whom he had just battled—and won.

"Don't turn your face away, Al," said the girl courageously. "You're the decent man my mother always said you were. She said you were worth a dozen like Hank, like Ken, and like Tallondice. I never said so. It irked me the way you ignored me!"

"Go on up to camp, you two," said old Tobe. "I know a rocky crevice not

far from here—and folks might as well think Brink and his pal *did* go over to the Brush River country."

"They might as well, Tobe," said the girl. She was off her horse, waiting for Al to start up the trail mottled with shadows and silver patches of moonlight. Then they were walking that trail slowly and Al was offering the girl the money he had taken off Brink.

"Keep it," she said. "You could make a real place at Coulee Creek with that much money, Al."

"Coulee Crick," he answered. "It's mightly lonesome there, Aileen. It's goin' to be lonesome for you, too."

"That depends," she said, "Out of all this grief, I'd hoped something better might come."

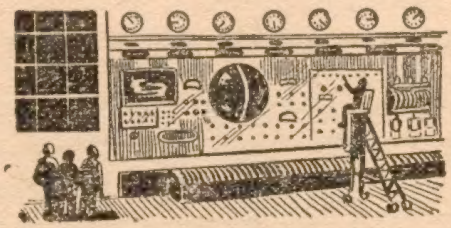
"We—could have each other," he faltered. "If that meant anything to you. Oh, I'm not much for sayin' things like this. But I've got to spill what's been in my heart for a long time. A long time I've worshipped you from a distance—"

That distance has shortened," she said, and stopped walking.

"He stopped, too. Studied her face—the firm chin, much like that of her father. The same straight nose. But the eyes, tear-filled now, resembled her mother's. Those eyes were speaking eloquently to this man looking into them. They were asking him to stay.

Answers to the "Western Test"

1. b
2. a
3. c
4. d
5. b
6. a
7. b
8. c



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Purchaser agrees to pay the balance due hereunder in 35 equal monthly installments of $4.33, and a final payment of $4.15, of which shall be payable on the 10th day of each month hereafter until paid in full, and agrees that if any payment is not made within 10 days after the date when due, Remington Rand may declare the total unpaid balance due and payable forthwith. As an alternative Remington Rand may elect to demand the immediate return of the equipment which will be delivered by the undersigned forthwith upon such demand. In the event that collection of the unpaid balance or the return of the equipment is referred to an attorney or a collection agency, purchaser agrees to pay all collection or repossession expenses and charges in connection therewith.

If the above described equipment is repossessed, all amounts theretofore paid by the undersigned purchaser on account hereof shall be considered rental for the period while in the undersigned's possession and upon payment of repossession expenses, if any, his agreement shall be deemed liquidated and the undersigned purchaser discharged as to any unpaid balance and other liability hereunder.

Purchaser agrees to keep the equipment in good condition and assumes full responsibility for same, including its loss by theft, damage or destruction.

The undersigned purchaser agrees to accept delivery of the above mentioned equipment upon acceptance of this agreement by Remington Rand Division of Sperry Rand Corporation and acknowledges receipt of a copy of this agreement.

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U. S. SCHOOL OF MUSIC
Studio A2748, Port Washington, N. Y.

I am interested in learning to play, particularly the instrument checked below. Please send me your free illustrated booklet, "How to Learn Music at Home." NO SALESMAN IS TO CALL UPON ME.

- ☐ Piano
- ☐ Guitar
- ☐ Steel Guitar
- ☐ Violin
- ☐ Piano Accordion
- ☐ Saxophone
- ☐ Trumpet, Cornet
- ☐ Pipe, Hamond, Reed Organ
- ☐ Tenor Banjo
- ☐ Ukulele
- ☐ Clarinet
- ☐ Trombone
- ☐ Flute
- ☐ Piccolo
- ☐ Modern Elementary Harmony
- ☐ Mandolin
- ☐ Practical Finger Control

Do you have the instrument?.....

Mr. / Mrs. / Miss .....
(Please Print Carefully)

Address.....

City.....
(Insert Zone Number, If Any) State.....

☐ If under 18, check here for Booklet A.

BUT IT'S NOT TOO LATE TO JOIN THE THOUSANDS WHO HAVE TAUGHT THEMSELVES THIS QUICK EASY INEXPENSIVE WAY!

YES, IT'S TRUE! If you had answered our ad a few weeks ago, **you'd be playing real music RIGHT NOW!** And you'd be well on your way toward mastering your favorite musical instrument—**even if you'd never known a single note before!**

Impossible? Not at all! Over 900,000 students have already taken up this famous home-study method—and even children "catch on" rapidly. Now ANYONE can learn to play the piano, violin, accordion, guitar, or any other instrument. And the cost is only a few cents per lesson, including valuable sheet music!

NO "SPECIAL TALENT" REQUIRED

No previous training needed, no "special talent" required. Right from the start, this amazing music discovery will have you playing **real melodies** instead of practicing boring scales and exercises. Clear, simple directions and show-how pictures tell you exactly what to do, so you can't go wrong. Soon you'll amaze your friends by playing your favorite songs easily, confidently, **by note!** No inconvenient lesson periods, no expensive hourly tuition. You learn in spare time of your own choosing.

STOP MISSING THESE JOYS

Why not let the U. S. School of Music method bring the many joys of music into your life? Good times! More confidence. New friends. Gay parties. Extra money from playing or teaching. Possibly even a brilliant musical career. Best of all, the deep **satisfaction** of being able to create your own music.

SEND FOR FREE BOOK

See for yourself why our method has been so successful for 59 years! Mail coupon AT TOP of Page for valuable 36-page FREE BOOK. No obligation! No salesman will call! It can mean so much to you for the rest of your life—if you mail coupon today. U. S. School of Music, Studio A2746, Port Washington, N. Y. **(Special Reduced Prices on Instruments to Our Students.)**

Choose Your Favorite Instrument

Now it's easy to learn—by note—Piano, Guitar, Accordion, Violin, Steel Guitar, Mandolin, Trumpet, Cornet, Saxophone, Tenor Banjo, Organ, Ukulele, Clarinet, Trombone, Flute or Piccolo—check your choice in coupon.

MAIL COUPON NOW—PLAY NEXT MONTH

THOUSANDS NOW PLAY WHO NEVER THOUGHT THEY COULD!

12-Year-Old Surprises Her Friends

"I am twelve years old. Thanks to your Course, I was able to play for our church. All my friends were certainly surprised when they discovered I could play!"—**Patsy Jeffrey Sweetwater, Texas**

How Famous Orchestra Leader Got His Start

"I got my start in music with a U.S. School Course. How easy it is to learn to read notes and play an instrument this 'teach yourself' way!"—**Lawrence Welk, famous orchestra leader.** (Picture at left)

Excels Friend Who Has Teacher

"I never took lessons before I started to take them from you—and still I can play better than my friends who began at the same time I did with a private teacher."—**Joan Lueck, Big Stone, South Dakota**

"How Rapidly I am Progressing"

"I just want to tell you how much I enjoy your lessons for the Tenor Banjo, and how rapidly I am progressing. Lessons are so simple, anyone can understand them."—**Andrew Schneider, Hanna, Wyoming.** (Picture at left)

"Opened Door to Popularity"

"I was able to play many pieces in a short time. Course opened door to popularity, wider circle of friends."—**Peter H. Kozyra, P.O. Brokenhead, Manitoba.** (Picture at left)

Now Invited Out Lots

"It's been fun. Hasn't cost anywhere near as much as private teacher. Now invited to affairs, dances."—**Howard Hopkins, E. Syracuse, N. Y.** (Picture at left)

Now Plays at Church

"I had tried several times to start music lessons. I had been depending on a teacher before. Now I play at church, etc."—**Mrs. P. J. Tatman, Sycamore, Illinois.**